



**CONSPIRACY  
GOES VIRAL**

**5G, COVID-19 AND THE  
END OF THE WORLD...**

**LITTLE GREEN MEN IRISH ENCOUNTERS WITH THE FAIRY FOLK  
BLOODSUCKING FREAKS MALAWI'S RESURGENT VAMPIRE PANIC  
THE PARALLAX VIEW MEETING SCOTLAND'S FLAT EARTHERS**

**AIRPORT ENTITIES • DEAD SEA SCROLL DECEPTION • DOGGY DOCTORS • POCONG PATROL**

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# ForteanTimes

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ICONS OF DEATH**

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**THE GHOSTLORE OF  
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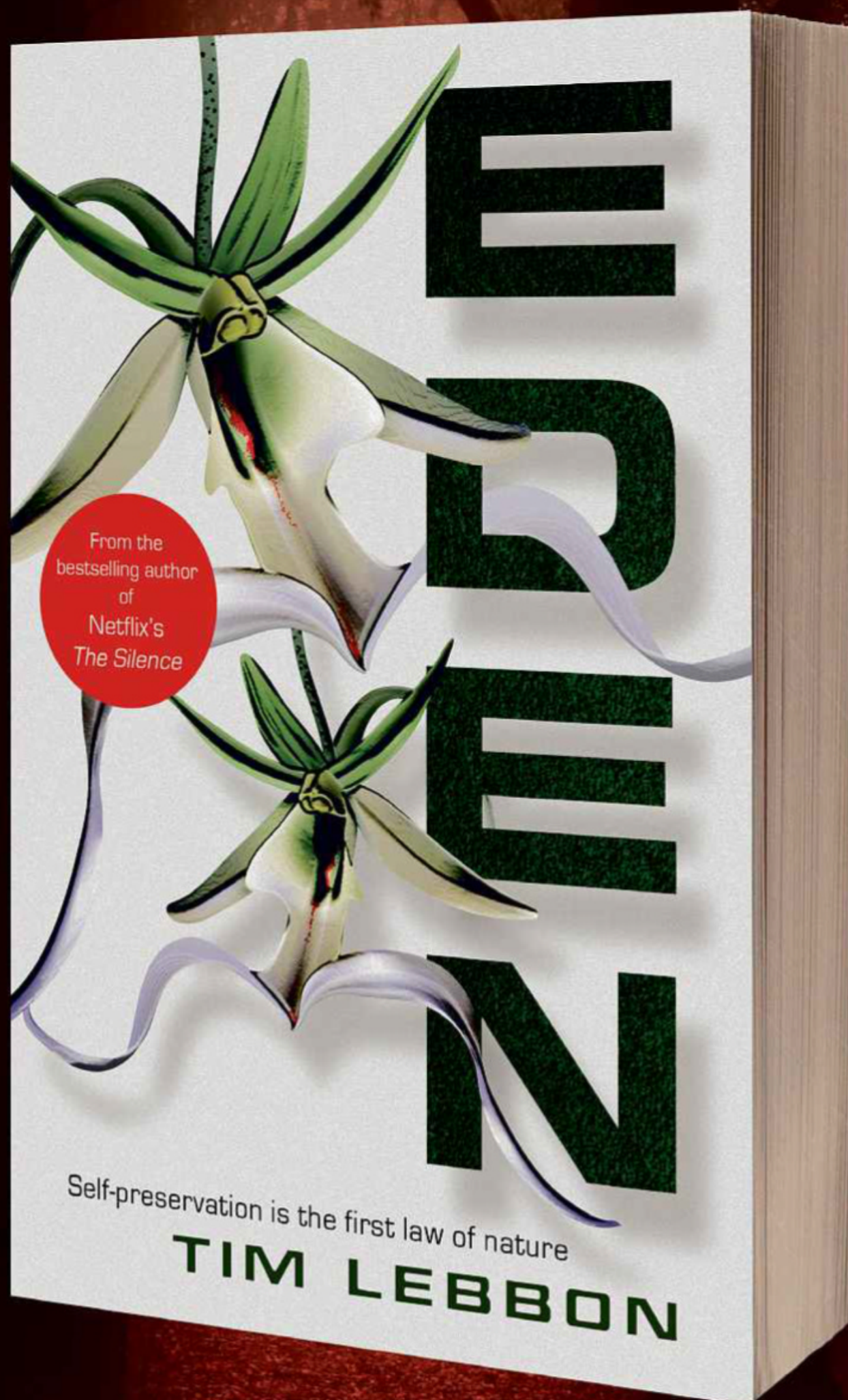
**POLTERGEISTS  
OR DODGY  
PLUMBING?**





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YOU ARE IN THE HANDS OF A MASTER”**

**Josh Malerman, author of *Bird Box***



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# EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

## LOCKDOWN NOTICEBOARD

Welcome to the latest lockdown issue of *Fortean Times*. While it is, we hope, packed with good stuff, the number of notices this month means that there's no room for introductions: so, just read on and dive in!

### **CRESWELL CRAGS APPEAL**

If you enjoyed last issue's cover feature on the witch marks of Creswell Crags in Derbyshire, then do think about helping them through a crisis. Creswell Crags is an independent charity that relies on visitor income, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic they are closed to the public, and their future survival is in doubt. If you can donate any amount, then please visit their Just Giving page at: <https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/supportcreswellcrag>.

### **JOIN BOB'S ARMY OF INDEXERS!**

Bob Rickard, the founder of FT, is still at work on his long-term project of producing a comprehensive index of the magazine. Here, he provides an update and asks for your help.

"I call this project a wikidex because unlike the formal hierarchical structure of a conventional index, I am exploiting the hyper-linking facilities of a wiki so that dynamic, multiple and complex links and lists can be drawn from the same dataset. This better suits the complexity of our fortean subject matter. As you can imagine, capturing every indexable element is a time-consuming job, demanding attention to detail, patience and – above all – endurance. Over the last 18 months, the task has proved much harder than many of our near-30 volunteers anticipated. Today, we are down to just three of these dogged stalwarts. Only 35 issues have been indexed for Phase 2 so far, with 300 piling up ahead of us. The short of it is that we need more volunteers.

"The work is not hard, but it is lonely, tedious, repetitive and slow: ideal for home working in these times of lockdown, but it needs an ability to focus for an hour or two a day, several days a week. Fair warning: this proved unexpectedly hard for some volunteers to factor into their lives and they had to retire. We are grateful that they cared enough to volunteer in the first place and each one of them left us with pages done. The work needs three simultaneously open files: a plain text and a Word docx, which you will cut and paste between, and a PDF image of an issue page open for reference.

"If you are interested, do let me know at [ft-bobrickard@mail.com](mailto:ft-bobrickard@mail.com). I will send you a set

of files via a digital link which will contain all you need to begin: including a Q&A that has emerged from the work so far. Feel free to decline after seeing the material, or at any time after you have started. I know how 'real life' can make demands and they must take precedence."

### **GETTING COPIES OF FT**

We know that it hasn't been easy getting hold of FT as a result of lockdown restrictions on travel and shopping. We have tried to provide up-to-date information on how to buy copies in the current situation – turn to p54 for more. Obviously, taking out a subscription is the best way to guarantee your regular FT fix, and if you are in a position to support us in this way, then please turn to p58 for the latest offers.

### **ERRATA**

**FT388:17:** Max Garrod of Carrs Creek, New South Wales, Australia, pointed out that there was a typo in Carolyn Waudby's footnote, which mentioned "Frank Franzetta". We're certain most FT readers would have realised that this was meant to be the artist "Frank Frazetta", but as Max points out, artists can be justifiably "offended... if wrongly attributed, either by name or artwork."

**FT389:45:** Rob Gandy noted a caption error in his feature "Brides, Bridges and Spacemen", which reads: "Keele Bank, outside Newcastle-under-Lyme, where Mike Walters's father saw the 'spaceman'". Rob points out: "It was not Mike Walters's father. As stated in the text, it was the father of Mike Walters's friend, who is also called "Mike". An understandable confusion – I found writing the relationships a bit tricky! But I don't want people thinking that it was Mike Walters's Dad."

**FT390:15:** The photo of the LAPIS conference delegates should have been credited to Juliette Gregson.

### **NEW ADDRESS FOR FT NEWS CLIPPINGS**

Please note that we now have a new address to which you should send your clippings. The old PO Box will continue to operate for two months, but from now on, please email stories to [csjosiffe@forteantimes](mailto:csjosiffe@forteantimes) and address your envelopes to: **FORTEAN TIMES, PO BOX 66598, LONDON, N11 9EN.**





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## A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

# STRANGE DAYS

## COVID-19: CONSPIRACIES GO VIRAL

Another month in lockdown, another round-up of coronavirus-related news items

### NORFOLK PLAGUE DOCTOR

Police are trying to trace a person seen walking around the Norfolk village of Hellesdon dressed as a 17th century plague doctor, complete with black cloak, hat, and beak-like mask. Villagers are reported to be variously “terrified” and amused by the individual, who many have spotted on their daily walk during the past two weeks. Hellesdon’s modern-day ‘plague doctor’ has sparked lively discussion on local social media. “Scared the life out of my missus. Terrifying for kids,” wrote one local. Another agreed: “Just casually strolling around the village in a plague costume? That’s just not normal is it? Do it indoors.” But others offered a different take: “I admit he is weird but what harm is he doing? Made me giggle,” said one, while another pointed out that wearing the costume was not illegal “and if he can’t wear it now, when could he?”

Norfolk Police say they are “keen to trace the individual in order to provide words of advice about the implications of his actions on the local community.” For more on plague doctors, see pp34-40. *BBC News*, 28 Apr 2020.

### COVID-19 CONSPIRACIES

Conspiracy theories and scapegoats regarding disease outbreaks are nothing new. In 1918, Brazilian newspaper *A Careta* blamed the ‘Spanish Flu’ pandemic on Germany, claiming the virus had been deliberately spread by German submarines, with innocent people “falling victim to the Germans’ treacherous bacteriological creation.” Elsewhere, foreigners, Jews, dancing, and jazz music were all held responsible for the



spread of the disease.

Historians Norman Cohn (*Europe’s Inner Demons*, 1975) and Carlo Ginzburg (*Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*, 1991) both described how lepers and Jews were persecuted in mediæval Europe for their supposed role in spreading diseases. One particular rumour held that lepers had been bribed by Jews to contaminate public fountains and wells in order to kill the Christians, the Jews acting on behalf of the Muslim ruler of Granada. When the Black Death swept through Europe in the mid-14th century, Jews were accused of having poisoned wells in order to spread the plague. These accusations led to numerous pogroms; around 350 massacres of Jews took place between 1349 and 1351, at Toulon, Aragon, Stras-

bourg, Mainz, Frankfurt and many other towns, leading to the migration of Northern Europe’s Jewish population eastwards to settle in Poland and Lithuania.

In 2020, Jews are also accused of involvement in spreading the disease; a cartoon appearing on social media portrays Israeli planes dropping ‘bombs’ of coronavirus on people. Another cartoon shows the Israeli flag with the familiar spiked coronavirus in its centre instead of the Star of David. *wellcomecollection.com*, 18 Sep 2019; *theconversation.com*, 6 Apr; *israeltoday.co.il*, 7 Apr 2020.

- A YouTube video featuring a male voice claiming to be a ‘former Vodaphone boss’ proposes the theory that implementation of the 5G network causes cell poisoning in the human body because

LEFT: The mysterious ‘plague doctor’ seen walking around the Norfolk village of Hellesdon in April.

its frequency is 10 times higher than 4G. The man says that the human body’s cells try to expel this poisoning by excreting RNA/DNA proteins, and that these excreted fluids eventually leave our bodies through the nose and mouth. Thus, it’s not the coronavirus that causes people to become ill and die, but radiation from 5G satellites, towers and phones. He further claimed that these were first rolled out six months ago in Wuhan, then Spain, then Italy, and so on, and that the radiation takes six months to impact upon the human body.

5G is being implemented because it is the only network capable of handling a world run by AI, with the coming Internet of Things bringing a new global currency, driver-less cars, “and many hidden agendas connected to 5G”. Although the powers that be now know that 5G is causing the pandemic, there is too much at stake to turn back. The speaker adds that three major pandemics in the last 120 years were caused by implementation of new technology: the Spanish flu in 1918, caused by the introduction of radio waves; an unnamed pandemic “right after the Second World War, caused by the implementation of radar using satellites”; and in 1968, the roll-out of more radar, putting another 100,000 satellites into space, led to the Hong Kong Flu.

He also brings in two more familiar conspiracy themes: vaccination and chipping of humans. *(continued on page 6)*





## DOGGY DOCTORS

Mutts turn medic to sniff out disease

PAGE 8



## TRAVELLERS' TALES

The ghostlore and legends of Britain's gypsies

PAGE 18



## VAMPIRE WEEKEND

Malawi's bloodsucker panic spreads

PAGE 26

# THE CONSPIRASPHERE

NOEL ROONEY notes that allegations based on inaccurate reporting and tenuous rumour are being bandied about by the mainstream media as well as the conspiratorial fringes

## KNIVES OUT FOR JOE

If a conspiracy theory's success can be measured by the amount of moral panic it inspires – say to the point where commentators credit it with things it hasn't done, for instance – then QAnon is very successful indeed. The number of times an actual QAnon supporter has come out into the real world and done something both criminal and verifiably inspired by the actual Q, whoever that may be, can be counted on the fingers of one hand (touch and go for a penitent Yakuza, but doable). Nonetheless, many in the media are prepared to point to an instance of lunacy, reference Q and mutter 'we're all doomed' in a hollow voice.

Jessica Prim, a 37-year-old woman from Illinois, was arrested in New York recently at a dock she mistakenly believed to be the berth of the *USS Comfort*, a hospital ship providing medical services during the Covid-19 outbreak, and believed by a few in the Conspirasphere to be instead a sort of way station for children kidnapped by a paedophile cabal among which top Democrats figure prominently. She had live-streamed her trip to New York, armed with an impressive collection of knives, on a mission to 'take out' Joe Biden, the Democrat presidential candidate. Ms Prim, who also allegedly claims that Donald Trump speaks directly to her during his press conferences, and who was in possession of an undisclosed amount of cannabis on her arrest, is certainly part of the QAnon community. And she is quite clearly a believer in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, which has little or nothing to do with Q. But why let a little thing like total inaccuracy get in the way of a good press story?

Jessica Prim, to go by the available evidence, has some significant mental health issues, and will hopefully be treated humanely by the police and the courts. Her actions, her intentions, and her justification for them are not easily judged in the light of her mental state. But they are not 'inspired'

by Q, and are at best only loosely inspired by others in the QAnon movement. And when news reports fail to comment on her obvious difficulties, but use her actions to point gleefully accusing fingers at a non-mainstream belief system, they are not doing any kind of public service. If Ms Prim had been a radical feminist aiming to 'take out' Joe Biden (not beyond the bounds of the imagination given Mr Biden's alleged history around women), and in similar emotional straits, would any news reports have dared to suggest that radical feminism was some kind of threat to democracy?

There is no shortage of finger-pointing in the miasma of conspiracy theories around coronavirus and its origins. One theory suggests that the virus was imported into Wuhan by the US, specifically by members of the US team attending the World Military Games last October. Maatje Benassi took part in a cycling competition, and has since been singled out as the individual responsible for carrying the virus (alleged to have been manufactured, or domesticated, at Fort Detrick) to China and spreading it.

The person behind the accusation, George Webb, is no novice at this game. His YouTube channel (which has an alarmingly large number of subscribers) regularly offers tenuous rumour in the space where evidence is supposed to appear. In this case, as well as Ms Benassi and her husband, Webb included an Italian DJ (whom Webb also accused of being Dutch) called Benassi, although he is no relative of the American couple. The claim that there is a Benassi family plot to depopulate the world by means of Covid-19 would be merely risible were it not for the fact that Maatje Benassi has been hounded, both online and in person, by people who have taken Webb at his word. I'm not suggesting that the mainstream press is as fast and loose with the truth as the Webbs of this world; but in a time of worldwide fear and anxiety, is a little attention to accuracy too much to ask?

## EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

**'MONKEY FIGHTERS' ARMED WITH AIR GUNS RECRUITED BY JAPANESE VILLAGE TO FIGHT OFF SWARMS OF INVADING ANIMALS**

Independent, 19 Aug 2019.

**Everybody was flung poo fighting: battle over discarded dog waste**

Dundee Eve. Telegraph, 12 July 2019.

**CARJACKER ON METH ABDUCTS MAN AND HIS PET GOAT FROM MISSOURI ADULT STORE, COPS SAY**

kansascity.com, 1 Jan 2020.

**Owner of chicken mauled to death by a dog is awarded large payout because the bird was a trained actor and had appeared in a German TV movie**

dailymail.co.uk, 17 Jan 2020.





- Following the spread of 5G-coronavirus rumours, at least 20 5G masts in the UK have been set alight, including one in Birmingham that services the new emergency NHS Nightingale hospital, set up in the wake of



DAN KITWOOD / GETTY IMAGES

A South London church was selling £91 'plague protection kits' comprising oil and red string. According to Bishop Climate Ministries, part of the Kingdom Church on Camberwell Station Road, the product protects against coronavirus: "It is by faith that you can

on all religious services. He had initially argued for synagogues to be exempt from the ban. Other ultra-Orthodox synagogues had remained open, and police were forced to break up prayer services after undercover officers disguised as ultra-Orthodox Jews attended. Statistics have shown that 29 per cent of Israeli patients infected with the coronavirus contracted it in a synagogue.

● An evangelical pastor who kept his church open in defiance of restrictions on public gatherings. Over 10 people have died from coronavirus. At the time of writing, Deliverance Evangelistic Church in New York City had 11 members. The pastor told his congregation on 22 March he firmly believed that “God is larger than this dreaded virus,” adding that “people are healed” in his church. Openly announcing he was being “in violation” of safety protocols, with “way more than 10 people” in the building, he vowed to keep the church open “unless I’m in jail or the hospital.” Three weeks later, his church announced “with an exceedingly sorrowful and heavy heart” that the pastor had died a week after being diagnosed with





Covid-19. His wife, Marcietia Glenn, is also ill. Daughter Mar-Gerie Crawley said her father initially dismissed his symptoms because of a pre-existing condition that often causes fevers and infections. She is now urging everyone to stay home. “I just beg people to understand the severity and the seriousness of this, because people are saying it’s not just about us, it’s about everyone around us.” *nypost.com*, 13 Apr 2020.

- Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne of The River megachurch in Tampa, Florida, was arrested for holding a crowded service in defiance of local anti-coronavirus orders limiting gatherings. Howard-Browne had claimed his church had special virus-killing equipment: “If somebody walks in the door, it’s like it kills everything on them. If they sneeze, it shoots it down at like 100 mph, it’ll neutralise it in split-seconds,” he said in a video broadcast. “So we have the most sterile building in, I don’t know, all of America”. The pastor has previously described Covid-19 as a “phantom plague” created by China and pushed by “communists” in the media. *huffpost.com*, 30 Mar 2020.

## ANGRY GOD

Shi’ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr has claimed same-sex marriage caused the outbreak of the pandemic. Sadr, also a militia leader, was harboured by Iran from 2007 until 2011, and studied in its religious city of Qom. “One of the most appalling things that have caused this epidemic is the legalisation of same-sex marriage,” Sadr tweeted, adding: “Hence, I call on all governments to repeal this law immediately and without any hesitation.” *jpost.com*, 29 Mar 2020.

- Another Shi’ite scholar, Hadi Al-Modarresi, declared the coronavirus outbreak to be an “act of Allah” as retribution against China for its mistreatment of its minority Muslim population. “Allah sent a disease upon them and this disease laid siege to 40 million [Chinese people]”, he said in a video broadcast. “The same niqab [face masks] that they mocked has been



ABOVE: Police inspector Rajesh Babu wears a coronavirus-themed helmet during India’s government-imposed nationwide lockdown.

forced upon them, both men and women, by Allah, by means of the state authorities and officials.” Al-Modarresi, who lives in Qom, Iran, was subsequently diagnosed as being infected with the virus, and uploaded a picture of himself wearing a face mask. Iran has been one of the countries worst affected by the pandemic. *nationalfile.com*, 13 Mar 2020.

- Apparent similarities between current events and End of Days prophecies in the Book of Revelation are being suggested by devout Christians, who have been using social media to disseminate their apocalyptic world view. In Revelation, a series of catastrophes are described, presaging the end of the world, often categorised as War, Plague, Famine and Death. However, “Those who know nothing of the New Testament or about Armageddon might think this is the end of days, but it really isn’t,” said theology expert Jeff Keenley. “In the Book of Revelation it specifies that there will be famine, earthquake and plagues which will strike several points across the world. Clear signs for the gates of Heaven opening. Has that happened? No. as such, you can breathe easy. This isn’t Armageddon.” *jpost.com*, 26 Mar 2020.

## NOSING AROUND

Australian doctor Daniel Reardon had to be hospitalised after inserting magnets in his nostrils while attempting to build a necklace that sounds an alarm when you touch your face during the coronavirus outbreak.

Dr Reardon, a research fellow at a Melbourne university, said he was trying to alleviate the boredom of self-isolation using four powerful neodymium magnets. “I have some electronic equipment but really no experience or expertise in building circuits or things,” he told a reporter. “I had a part that detects magnetic fields. I thought that if I built a circuit that could detect the magnetic field, and we wore magnets on our wrists, then it could set off an alarm if you brought it too close to your face.”

The 27-year-old astrophysicist said he placed two magnets inside his nostrils and two on the outside. When he removed the magnets from the outside of his nose, the two inside stuck together. Unfortunately, the researcher then attempted to use his remaining magnets to remove them. “I was trying to pull them out but there is a ridge at the bottom of my nose you can’t get past,” he explained. “After struggling for 20 minutes, I decided to

Google the problem and found an article about an 11-year-old boy who had the same problem. The solution in that was to put more magnets on the outside to offset the pull from the ones inside. As I was pulling downwards to try and remove the magnets, they clipped on to each other and I lost my grip. And those two magnets ended up in my left nostril while the other one was in my right. At this point I ran out of magnets.”

Dr Reardon then attempted to remove the foreign objects using pliers, but they became magnetised by the magnets. “Every time I brought the pliers close to my nose, my entire nose would shift towards the pliers and then the pliers would stick to the magnet,” he said. “It was a little bit painful at this point.”

At the hospital, doctors applied an anaesthetic spray and manually removed the magnets from Reardon’s nose, but not without a final mishap. “When they got the three out from the left nostril, the last one fell down my throat. That could have been a bit of a problem if I swallowed or breathed it in, but I was thankfully able to lean forward and cough it out. Needless to say, I am not going to play with the magnets any more”. *guardian.co.uk*, 30 Mar 2020.



## SIDELINES...

### PORCINE FIRESTARTER

North Yorkshire firefighters tackled a blaze at a piggery after a pig swallowed a pedometer. When excreted, it began to combust, setting light to dry hay. The fire at Bramham near Leeds covered 75m<sup>2</sup> (800ft<sup>2</sup>) and four pigpens. The pedometer was being used to prove the animal was free range and had been taken from a fellow pig. *guardian.co.uk*, 8 Mar 2020.

### EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TRUMP

A Florida man undergoing kidney dialysis treatment three times a week was refused permission to bring a life-sized cardboard cut-out of President Trump with him to hospital. "They told me it was too much, and it wasn't a rally", said disappointed patient Nelson Gibson. *<i>*, 15 Feb 2020.

### DENTAL DRAMA

An Iranian asylum-seeker was in so much dental pain he asked police to shoot him, claiming he had 3kg (6.6lb) of explosives on his body. Greater Manchester police arrested a man wearing a fake suicide vest. Sentencing him to one year in jail, the judge said: "Your status as asylum-seeker made it difficult to access treatment. That doesn't excuse what you did". *Sun*, 15 Feb 2020.

### ALL MUST REPENT

Wisconsin police say a woman performed a spiritual ritual on a dead possum lying in the road by throwing goldfish and windshield washer fluid on it. She then pulled out a Green Bay Packers lawn chair and yelled "repent" at the dead animal. *wftv.com*, 26 Feb 2020.



MARTIN ROSS

## DOGGY DOCTORS | The canine medics who sniff out conditions from cancer to epilepsy



MEDICAL DETECTION DOGS / BEX ARTS

ABOVE: Bumper, one of the many dogs trained by the UK charity Medical Detection Dogs to sniff out dangerous medical conditions in humans.

New research confirms that some dogs are able to predict when someone is likely to suffer an epileptic seizure. The trained animals detect a particular odour emitted by humans during a seizure, and can distinguish this smell from others. One potential application of this canine advance warning system would be that epilepsy sufferers ensure they are in a safe environment prior to the seizure's onset.

Amélie Catala, lead author of the study at France's University of Rennes, notes that the origin of the odour is as yet unknown, but speculates it may be associated with electrical activity releasing neurohormones. Dogs are already known to be able to sniff out breast and lung cancer and diabetes. It has been estimated that the percentage of a dog's brain devoted to analysing odours is 40 times larger than that of humans, and dogs have 300 million smell receptors in their noses compared to our 5 million. *D.Telegraph*, 29 Mar 2019.

### Dogs are known to be able to sniff out breast and lung cancer

- When dressage competitor Kelly Ann Alexander began to suffer up to 15 seizures a day, she was prescribed anti-epilepsy medication, which proved ineffective. But when her horse Aliyana began to sniff the right side of her head, scans revealed a tumour which was surgically removed. "My horse is the best therapy I could have," said Ms Alexander, 43. "She was the first to make sense of what was happening to me." *Metro*, 17 Feb 2020.
- Similarly, mother-of-three Lisa Johnson also believes that Marley, her Staffordshire bull terrier, saved her life by alerting her to a lump in her breast she was unaware of. "Marley had been acting really strangely,"

said Ms Johnson, 37. "She would clamp herself next to me... then she'd come and sit next to me on the bed. The only time she had been like that was when I was pregnant. She sniffed out all three pregnancies at about four weeks." Tests diagnosed early stage cancer, but following chemotherapy and surgery, Lisa was given the all-clear. *D.Express*, 13 Apr; *Nottingham Post*, 26 Dec 2016.

- Chesney, a Yorkshire terrier, Jack Russell and chihuahua cross, has earned a reputation for successfully being able to identify pregnant women. She has been correct on at least three occasions in cases where the women were unaware they were pregnant. It has been suggested that Chesney is picking up on hormonal changes that manifest as altered body odour. *Sun*, 18 Mar 2017.

- Pub landlady Liz Harris was rescued by her two-year-old jackapoo (a Jack Russell-Poodle cross) Boris after she had collapsed from a stroke in an upstairs room while her husband David was out. When he returned to their pub in Bideford, Devon, Boris began barking and scratching at his trousers and led him upstairs. David was then able to dial 999 and get his wife quickly to hospital, swift treatment being a key element in post-stroke recovery. *Sunday*, 18 Jan 2015.

- A study by Imperial College London and the Cystic Fibrosis Trust suggests that dogs are able to detect a cause of lung damage before cystic fibrosis takes hold. In tests, dogs managed to sniff out pseudomonas, ultra-low concentrations of bacteria which are otherwise hard to detect in children. *Sun*, 15 Aug 2019.

- Diabetic Chris Gardner's golden retriever Jade has alerted him on hundreds of occasions to warn that his blood sugar is too low, thus preventing Chris from slipping into a coma. Chris, 34, from Pendlebury, Greater Manchester, says that





over a single three-month period, Jade had tapped him with her paw or jumped up at him to warn of his blood sugar levels. *D.Mirror*, 10 Feb 2018.

- Six-year-old Akita Flora has won several Crufts awards, but has also proved to be a lifesaver for her owner Robert Stuhldreer, who suffers from regular blackouts. When they are out walking, she is usually well-behaved, but sometimes will stop and block his path, tugging at his hand with her mouth to persuade him to lie down. Moments later, he passes out. The condition was undiagnosed for many years, but Robert eventually learned he has cardiac syncope, a condition whereby the heart will sometimes fail to supply oxygen to the brain, leading to loss of consciousness. This can

happen at any time – standing on a train platform, crossing a busy road – so Flora’s warnings give Robert a few moments to move to a safer place. Dogs have also detected malaria and other diseases, and now Medical Detection Dogs, a UK-based charity, is training dogs to identify specific odours associated with certain medical conditions. See [www.medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk/](http://www.medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk/) for more information on the charity’s work. *D.Mail*, 16 Jan 2018.

- Other animals have similar abilities. Rats are able to test around 100 samples for TB in 30 minutes, whereas a lab technician would take four days. There are also reports of cats diagnosing illnesses. Kirsty Furness, 28, suffers from type 1 diabetes and says she owes her

life to her rescue tabby Charlie, 20, who has pawed and yowled at her dozens of times when she was asleep to alert her that her blood sugar levels were falling dangerously low. “If I didn’t wake up, I could go into a coma or die,” she explained.

On the other hand, Oscar, a therapy cat at a Rhode Island nursing home, has an unerring ability to diagnose the imminent demise of terminally ill patients (see **FT228:4-5**). He has a habit of curling up next to patients in their final hours, and it has been hypothesised that he detects a particular smell emitted during the death process. By 2015, Oscar had diagnosed 100 deaths. *Sun*, 5 Aug 2015; *D.Mirror*, 3 Aug 2017.

For more accounts of animal doctors, see **FT205:18-19**, **293:24-25**, **339:22-23**, **382:26-27**.

## SIDELINES...

### CATNAPPED

A man walking past an apartment block in Archangelsk, Russia, became a rescuer when he heard a woman calling for help from a third-storey flat. She had been trapped in there for two days by her cat; whenever she approached her front door, the animal had “attacked her violently”. *Courier Picard (Amiens)*, 31 Jan 2020.

### FINNEGAN'S WAKE REVISITED

A Dublin man had the last laugh with a recording of his own voice played during his burial. Mourners at Shay Bradley’s funeral were startled when they heard the sound of knocking, as if on a coffin lid, and the deceased’s voice shouting: “Hello? Hello? Where am I? It’s dark in here. Let me out!” *Irish Independent*, 15 Oct 2019.

### TOOTH GHOULS

When the body of a 50ft (15m) whale was washed up on the shores of the Moray Firth in the Highlands of Scotland, coastguards mounted patrols to prevent scavengers from prising loose the sea creature’s molars. Sperm whale teeth are valuable, and are sold at antique fairs and markets. *Sun*, 12 Jan 2020.

### GREY EMINENCE

Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, 62, ruled Turkmenistan for years while dying his hair black, ordering any of his greying countrymen to do the same. Finally ceasing to dye his hair in 2018, the president has banned all government employees over 40 from using hair dye, and ordered all those whose hair is still black to dye it grey. *D.Mail*, 8 Feb 2020.

### ONCE BITTEN

A woman attacked by a serial sex offender bit off his penis, said South Carolina police. Dennis Slaton, 61, had abducted the victim after offering her a lift, forcing her into his home where he threatened her with a knife and sexually assaulted her. As well as severing his penis, she took his knife and stabbed him in the buttocks before escaping. Slaton was taken to hospital and then arrested. *Irish Independent*, 1 Nov 2019.



### NASA SEAL

Scientists at NASA’s jet propulsion agency in Pasadena, California, have tagged a southern elephant seal and are using it to monitor changes in temperature as it swims 3,000 miles (4,800km) away in the Antarctic Ocean. The animal made around 80 dives during its three-month journey, collecting data on how heat

moves vertically between different layers of the ocean, which was then compared with satellite data. It had been thought that heat produced by global warming was sucked down into the ocean’s depths, where it was cooled. However, the seal’s findings indicate that eddies within the current transport the hot water back to the surface. *D.Telegraph*, 6 Dec 2019.





## SIDELINES...

### WHAT LIES BENEATH

A giant, 170ft (52m) long fatberg weighing “around the same as three elephants” has been discovered in sewers underneath a prison, HMP Manchester. Specialist water jetting teams blasted the blockage to break it loose, then removed some of it by hand, but warned it could take weeks to fully remove the glob. Fatbergs are formed when fats and oil are poured down sinks and drains and combine with items like wet wipes, nappies, and dental floss. *BBC News, 19 Dec 2019.*

### SPEED BUMP

Officers from Thailand’s Narcotics Control Board seized a Honda CR-V car during a drugs case, later putting it up for auction. The purchaser took it to a garage for servicing, where 94,000 *yaba* (speed) pills were found stashed behind its bumper. Officials said they would conduct more thorough searches in future. *BBC News, 25 Jan 2020.*

### LOTTO ‘MIRACLE’

An Australian lost his uninsured New South Wales home to the bushfires ravaging the country, then won 1 million Australian dollars (£517,600) in the national lottery after using his wife’s “special numbers”. He described the timing of the win as “impeccable”. *D.Mirror; <i>, 10 Jan 2020.*

### SOCK SNIFFER KO’D

A Chinese man was hospitalised after reporting chest pains; tests revealed a severe fungal infection in his lungs. The 37-year-old man admitted to the habit of sniffing his socks every day, and doctors linked the fungal spores in his lungs to those in his smelly socks. *Mail on Sunday, 16 Feb 2020.*



MARTIN ROSS

## LOST AND FOUND DEPT | Art treasures, homing rings, and a mixtape...



DEAGOSTINI / GETTY IMAGES



POLIZIA DI STATO

ABOVE LEFT: Klimt’s *Portrait of a Lady*, missing for 23 years. ABOVE RIGHT: Police tape off the cavity where the painting was found.

Stella Wedell lost a homemade mixtape of her favourite pop hits when she was 12, somewhere in the Costa Brava or Majorca in 1993. 26 years later, she was astonished to find the same tape in a Stockholm art exhibition. The cassette had been washed up over 1,200 miles (1930km) away in the Canary Islands in 2017 and found on a beach by artist Mandy Barker, who then incorporated it into her touring exhibition ‘Sea of Artefacts’. After it was sent to a professional audio restorer, the tape still played, including songs like Shaggy’s *Oh Carolina*, *The Key – The Secret* by Urban Cookie Collective and Bob Marley’s *Iron Lion Zion*. *D.Mail, 14 Feb 2020.*

- A metal detectorist found a wedding ring that had been lost 20 years ago by John Hewitson, 76, who had taken it off to wash his hands while on a train. Tyrone Holman, 50, located the ring beneath four inches (10cm) of soil, near Mr Hewitson’s old home at Occold, Suffolk. It was identifiable because of an inscription with a message from Mr Hewitson’s wife Christiane, 72, who had “become a bit irritated in the last few years about me having lost it,” said the pensioner, adding that “it was a wonderful surprise to get it back.” Mr Holman refused to accept a reward for finding the ring. *D.Express, 31 Mar 2020.*

- A high school class ring lost in Portland, Maine, has been found in Finland 47 years later. Debra McKenna, 63, lost the ring, which had belonged to her late husband Shawn, whom she had first dated during high school and college in 1973. Earlier this year, it was found under 20cm (8in) of soil in a Finnish forest by a sheet metal worker. Shawn gave Debra the ring before he left for college and she accidentally left it in a department store. It was mailed back to her US home from Finland. McKenna has no idea how the long-lost ring ended up in a Finnish forest. *(Sydney) D.Telegraph, 8 Feb 2020.*

- Another ‘homing ring’ story: Sarah Warfield, 59, lost a treasured gold ring that had belonged to her grandmother as she was filling her car with petrol at a garage in

Crickhowell, Wales. 15 years later, the nine-carat H Samuel ring made in 1948 was found in a drain next to the garage by sewer cleaner Ben Simpson, who posted a message on a local news Facebook group. “My husband saw it and said ‘Have you seen this?’” Sarah recalled. “My tummy turned over. I was so overwhelmed.” She contacted Ben and was reunited with the ring. *D.Express, 25 Feb 2020.*

- Gustav Klimt’s £50 million masterpiece *Portrait of a Lady* had been missing for 23 years, believed to have been stolen by art thieves. But last year it was rediscovered when a gardener clearing ivy in the grounds of Ricci Oddi Modern Art Gallery in Placenza, northern Italy, found the painting hidden behind a rusty metal door in the gallery wall. Behind the door was a cavity with a black plastic



ABOVE: Debra McKenna’s class ring was lost for 47 years and turned up in Finland.





ABOVE: The marble bust of Alexander found buried in the grounds of Sutton Place, once the home of John Paul Getty (right).

bag containing the portrait. Police believe thieves used a fishing line to hook it from the wall and haul it up through a skylight, then stashing it, but failed to return for it.

It subsequently emerged that the gallery's director Stefano Fugazza had considered staging the painting's disappearance to gain publicity. "I asked myself what could be done to give the exhibition some notoriety, to make the exhibition an unprecedented success," wrote Mr Fugazza in his diary at the time. "The idea that came to me was to organise a fake theft of the Klimt, just before the opening (this is exactly what happened, my God)."

In a further twist, two men who had been involved in other burglaries came forward to confess to the theft of the painting, but said they had decided to return it "as a gift" to the people of Placenza. It is thought they made the admission only because the 20-year statute of limitation had passed and they were immune from prosecution. Their confession might also be a bid for lenient sentencing on a separate theft charge. The painting itself has an intriguing history. Art experts using X-rays found a second portrait beneath the visible one. The original is believed to have been a portrait of a woman with whom Klimt was in love. When

she died, he painted over her in a bid to overcome his grief.

- A marble bust of Alexander the Great was dug up in the grounds of Sutton Place, a Tudor mansion in Surrey once belonging to Jean Paul Getty. The oil magnate had sold the property to art collector Stanley Seeger who proceeded to transform the garden. When the gardener found the 15in (38cm) bust in 1984, Seeger told him he could keep it. The owner kept it on display in his flat but recently had it examined. Art experts initially thought it an 18th- or 19th-century piece and valued it at £1,000, but subsequent examination determined it

dated back to the first century AD. It was eventually sold at auction at £385,000. *D.Express*, 12 Dec 2019; *D.Mail*, 18 Jan; *D.Telegraph* 12 Feb 2020.

- Ben Pritchard, 63, went into the Weldmar Hospicecare charity shop in Wimborne, Dorset. Among the items for sale he recognised a brown clay pot he had made himself, over 30 years ago and 100 miles (160km) away in Oxford. His initials were inscribed in the base, along with the date 1988. Mr Pritchard, a professional artist, had never been to Wimborne before and was only in the area to visit friends. He bought the pot for £3.50. *D.Telegraph* 10 Mar 2020.



ABOVE: Ben (holding his pot) and Cathy Pritchard with Assistant Manager Lynne Farwell (centre) at the Weldmar Hospicecare charity shop in Wimborne, Dorset.

## SIDELINES...

### CREMATION CONFUSION

A Thai funeral was thrown into disarray when Praphat, the supposedly deceased man, walked into the temple. The mutilated body of a man killed walking on railway tracks had been misidentified as Praphat, also seen wandering by the tracks on the day of the accident. He is said to suffer from mental problems. Police would like to hear from anyone in the area who may have lost a relative. *thaivisa.com*, 3 Feb 2020.

### YODA LETDOWN

Ex-Hooters waitress Jodee Berry, 26, is suing her former employer after winning a staff competition to see who could sell the most beer in a month. The winner was promised a new Toyota. To claim her prize, Jodee was blindfolded and taken to the car park, where she was disappointed to receive a toy Yoda *Star Wars* doll rather than a new car. *mashable.com*, 4 Feb 2020.

### DEADLY CAKES

A Queensland woman died after taking part in an Australia Day cake eating contest in which contestants speed ate lamingtons (a sponge cake covered with coconut and chocolate). The woman, in her 60s, was given CPR but later died. *E.Standard*, 27 Jan 2020.

### HE'S GOT MAIL

A Japanese postman hoarded 24,000 items of post at his home because it was "too much bother" to deliver them. The 61-year-old told police "I didn't want my colleagues to think I was less capable than younger people." Post officials said "We'll offer apologies to the senders and receivers as we deliver them." *Telegraph.co.uk*, 24 Jan 2020.

### FROZEN FRISSON

Cody Meader, 20, was arrested in a department store after allegedly engaging in a sexual act with two "large stuffed animal toys". Meader approached a display featuring characters from Disney's *Frozen*, before selecting a "large Olaf stuffed animal", placing it on the floor, and proceeding to 'dry hump' the movie snowman before being told to freeze by police. *D.Mirror*, 14 Dec 2019.





## SIDELINES...

### CAT WEAPON

A Russian man who thrust a cat into a policeman's face when asked to stop making a noise may be jailed for up to five years. Gen-nady Scherbakov, 59, picked up the hapless feline by the shoulder blades and shoved it into Sgt VA Tkachev's face, scratching him. *<i>*, 2 Nov 2019.

### TOE SUCKING BANDIT

Police in Florida are seeking a burglar who broke into a man's house and sucked his toes as he slept. The 20-year-old victim woke to find the miscreant at the foot of his bed, who announced he was there "to suck toes". *<i>*, 8 Jan 2020.

### ELEPHANT DUNG GIN

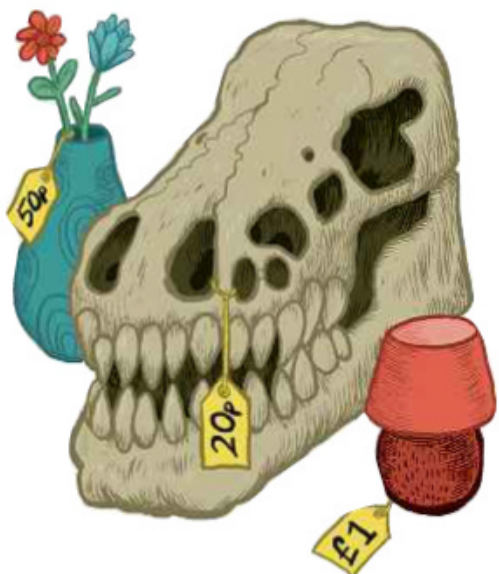
A South African company manufactures gin using elephant dung. As well as classic gin flavourings like juniper and coriander, Indlovu Gin includes extracts of the elephants' diet of roots, grasses, fruit and bark, including aloe and acacia. *cnn.com*, 30 Dec 2019.

### GOOD BREEDING

A local councillor offered to perform a pagan fertility ritual for a colleague, telling her she had "good breeding hips". The Stratford-upon-Avon councillor subsequently apologised, blaming his age and "the wrong tablets" for his actions. *<i>*, 25 Oct 2019.

### OLD BONES

A Norwich charity shop received an unusual donation – a box of bones. A volunteer from the East Anglian Children's Hospice shop took them to a local museum in her shopping trolley for evaluation. Museum staff pronounced the bones to be five-million-year-old dinosaur remains. *D.Mirror*, 21 Feb 2020.



## SCROLL DECEPTION | DC Museum's Dead Sea Scroll fragments turn out to be fakes



SAUL LOEB / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: A visitor to the Museum of the Bible looks at one of the 16 Dead Sea Scroll fragments now known to be forgeries.

Sixteen fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls held by the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, have been identified as forgeries. In October 2018, the Museum announced that five fragments on display were fakes, and commissioned an independent team of experts to mount an investigation of its entire collection. In their 200-page report, researchers from Art Fraud Insights pronounced the Museum's 16 exhibits to be markedly different from the 100,000 other examples of Dead Sea Scroll fragments held elsewhere.

The real scrolls were made from tanned parchment, unlike the Museum's ancient leather pieces, which researchers suggest have been repurposed from leather sandals of the Roman period. The fakes appear to have been soaked in an amber-coloured solution, possibly an animal-skin glue, which smoothed out the leather and made it resemble the real thing. Microscope analysis of the fakes also revealed ink

### Microscope analysis of the fakes revealed ink pooling

pooling and torn edges caused by the inscription; these wouldn't be present had the leather been new at the time of inscription.

The authenticity of the original Dead Sea Scrolls, held at Jerusalem's Israel Museum, is not challenged by news of the forgery, as they have an established provenance; first discovered in 1946 at Qumran (then in the British Mandate of Palestine, now the West Bank) by a Bedouin shepherd who found several large clay pots containing manuscripts hidden in a cave. Dated to between 408 BC and AD 318, they are written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Nabataean, mostly on parchment, but some are

written on papyrus or bronze. They feature parts of the Hebrew Bible and other extra-biblical texts. Tens of thousands of parchment and papyrus fragments constituting 972 manuscripts were recovered from Qumran between 1946 and 1956.

By contrast, the Museum of the Bible acquired its forged fragments when around 70 small pieces of biblical text suddenly appeared on the antiquities market in the early 2000s. Their origin and provenance were a mystery and, even at the time, there were doubts as to their authenticity. "Once one or two of the fragments were fake, you know all of them probably are, because they come from the same sources, and they look basically the same," said Årstein Justnes, a researcher at Norway's University of Agder. The other pieces will now be re-examined. *dailymail.com*, 13 March 2020. For more on the Dead Sea Scrolls, see FT93:28-33; 131:40-44; 134:52.





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## PAUL DEVEREUX digs up the latest archaeological discoveries from around the world

### A MAMMOTH MYSTERY

Mammoth-bone circles built in Russia around 22,000 years ago, at the approach of the last Ice Age, are well known to archaeologists and are usually interpreted, due to the evidence found at them, as dwelling and refuge sites constructed against the increasingly harsh, frigid conditions. But a site first discovered in 2014 presents something else. It is near Kostenki, Voronezh Oblast, 560km (350 miles) south of Moscow, on the banks of the River Don. This area is rich in Palaeolithic sites, and the recently discovered feature is the third mammoth-bone circle to be found there, at a site known as Kostenki 11. This has now been fully archaeologically investigated. It is much larger and c.3,000 years older than all other known examples, being a huge, circular structure 12.5m (41ft) across, with a continuous wall built with the bones of at least 60 woolly mammoths. There is no evidence of prolonged human activity within the ring of bones, which surprised and puzzled the investigating archaeologists, and so clearly wasn't used as some form of regular habitation or refuge. "I cannot possibly imagine how they would have roofed over this structure," opines Alexander JE Pryor, a lead archaeologist in the fieldwork. So, it wasn't some sort of giant hut circle. The exceptional nature of the structure "implies that it was meant to last, perhaps as a landmark, a meeting place, a place of ceremonial importance," suggests an expert at the University of Cambridge. But the actual nature of the great mammoth-bone site currently remains a mystery. *Smithsonian Magazine*, 16 Mar 2020. (Original paper in *Antiquity*: <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.7>)

### GUM LOST ITS FLAVOUR LONG AGO

Almost 6,000 years ago, a dark-skinned girl with dark hair and blue eyes threw a 2cm-long lump of her birch tar chewing gum into a lagoon at Syltholm, on Lolland Island, near the coast of southern Denmark. The gum may have lost its flavour for her, but it has revealed much about the girl to us today. Eagle-eyed researchers, excavating the site ahead of construction work on a tunnel, spotted the gum amid pieces of wood and wild animal bone. From it, they have reassembled the girl's complete DNA, thus yielding her entire genome and allowing a remarkable portrait of her to be constructed. Apart from giving us her basic physical appearance, the genetic data also revealed that she had over 40 species of bacteria in her mouth, including three linked to severe periodontal disease, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, a major cause of pneumonia, and a virus which can cause glandular fever. (Such bacteria can also live in



ABOVE: An aerial view of the large mammoth-bone circle found in Kostenki in 2014. BELOW: A 6,000-year-old stare from a stone-age girl who threw her chewing gum away, seen here in an artist's reconstruction.



the mouth without causing harm – hopefully that was so in this case.) Additionally, the DNA indicated that the girl – who has been nicknamed 'Lola' – belonged to hunter-gatherer people from continental Europe.

Hannes Schroeder, a molecular anthropologist at the University of Copenhagen, said: "This is the first time anyone has got a full ancient genome from anything other than bone or teeth. The preservation of the gum is quite extraordinary."

The very early Neolithic site itself had been more than just a fishing ground, with piles of bones from cattle, deer, ox, wildcats, dogs and otters all deposited there, near the remnants of wooden fish traps. It had been frequented over hundreds of generations. "This was a place of special significance," reckoned Theis Jensen from the University

of Copenhagen, lead researcher on the study. "These people didn't live at the site, but probably on dry land a couple of hundred metres away." *Guardian*, 17 Dec 2019.

### MY OLD IRISH

DNA analysis in 2016 of the skeletons of three prehistoric individuals unearthed in 2006 during building work at a pub in County Antrim, Ireland, yielded a surprise. It has always been popularly assumed that the modern Irish descended from Celtic cultures, and the DNA showed that the skeletons were indeed the ancestors of today's Irish; but radiocarbon dating showed the bones to be about 2,500 years old, several hundreds of years before any Celtic culture reached Ireland. "The genomes of the contemporary people in Ireland are older – much older – than we previously thought," commented Professor Dan Bradley, a genetics expert at Trinity College. "The DNA evidence based on those bones completely upends the traditional view," observed Barry Cunliffe, an emeritus professor of archaeology at Oxford. So modern Irish people have older genomic origins than any Celtic cultural influences, even if these have latterly been acquired. This research means that the people who built mighty megalithic monuments like Newgrange, dated to c.3,200 BC, almost certainly were the original ancestors of today's Irish population. A proud heritage. *IrishCentral*, 29 Mar 2020.

### HUSH-HUSH

Due to the coronavirus, Egypt has been sterilising all its key archaeological areas. Word is that in the course of this process at the Sphinx, a new archaeological discovery has been made. At the time of writing, the nature of the find has not been disclosed...





# CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

## 248: THE DICEMAN COMETH

Fort's autobiographical *Many Parts* (annotated edition online) mentions an aunt who "saw nothing wrong in gambling". Jim Steinmeyer's biography (p40) reports "His first gambling excursion led to a grand night on the town."

"The scent and smoke and sweat of a casino at three in the morning. Then the soul erosion produced by high gambling – a compost of greed and fear and nervous tension – becomes unbearable and the senses awake and revolt from it" – Ian Fleming, *Casino Royale*.

(Sources, archaeological and literary, are too many to particularise. Extensive repertoires in: R Lanciani, 'Gambling and Cheating in Ancient Rome,' *The North American Review* 155, 1892, pp.97-105, and Suzanne Ferris, *UNLV Gambling Law Journal* 3, 2012, pp.199-219, comparing ancient and modern regulations – both online)

When Julius Cæsar provoked civil war, he bequeathed us two proverbs: Cross the Rubicon and The Die Is Cast (albeit this latter was actually Latinised from a fragment of his favourite Greek comedian Menander). When promoting a referendum on constitutional change, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney bragged, "I rolled the dice", a phrase he later regretted. In Cæsar's case, it was doubly ironic. Both crossing the Rubicon with legions and gambling were illegal at Rome, except during the Saturnalia (which, along with Prince Albert, inspired our Christmas), and with greater licence granted to betting on charioteers and gladiators. Playing games of chance was simultaneously denounced and rampant throughout Roman history from children to old men, for whom Cicero said it was their last life's pleasure.

Post-Roman history continued these traditions, being said to have invented baccarat, backgammon, bingo, lotteries, and the word 'Casino', also branded in a *Guardian* article (24 Dec 2012) as one of the most gambling-addicted countries.

Both Suetonius (who wrote a – lost – *History of Games*) and the *Augustan History* animadvert against aleatory emperors. Caligula, Commodus, and Elagabalus all ran dishonest palace casinos to regain



LEFT: Roman era dice found in the Middle East and now on display in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The most elaborate description of a board game is a Greek poem by Agathias (sixth-century Byzantine) describing emperor Zeno coming to grief in the match. It's extremely hard to understand, as are rules for other attested games, e.g. *Latruncio*, possibly the ancestor of chess or draughts; cf. various articles by RG Austin (*Greece & Rome*, online) for gallant attempts to explain.

Juvenal mounts a slashing attack on Romans who gamble high stakes whilst not providing for their slaves' clothes – gambling the shirt off somebody else's back.

Lanciani's article highlights inscriptions on military gambling. Supreme example is obviously the soldiers at Christ's crucifixion, said by all four Gospels to cast lots for his clothes. Why they should want them – unless the mocking purple robe was included – is hard to fathom. Possibly, they were ridiculing the Jewish custom (frequent in the OT) of doing this to ascertain God's Will.

A popular game involving neither boards nor dice was *Morra*, aka *Micatio*, consisting simply of trying to guess how many fingers your opponent raised and lowered – a Petronius character is described as "so honest you could play *Morra* with him in the dark" – see YouTube for the Denver *Morra* club in action.

Gambling remained controversial throughout later antiquity. Christian emperor Theodosius I converted Constantinople's Temple of Artemis into a casino – what price modern church transformations? However, secular historian Amiantus denounces gambling passions, as does a sermon *On Gamblers* attributed to Bishop Cyprian, whilst Canon Law forbade the clergy to gamble.

Byzantine John Choumos (13th century) observes: "The spotted bones (sc. dice) promptly changed the mood of men, making some happy and others sad."

Brings us straight back to *Casino Royale*...

their wasted monies. The addicted Claudius had a carriage with fitted game board – Martial and Seneca describe tables with inlaid ones. Claudius also wrote a regrettably lost tract on gambling, including tips on how to cheat (a Roman John Scarne – Bond's bible). In the satirical pamphlet *Pumpkinification of Claudius*, his posthumous fate is to rattle dice in a bottomless cup forever. Vitellius's high stakes passion endeared him to Claudius. Dicing was a favourite pastime of Domitian, whilst Nero (a regular Nick the Greek) would wager 400,000 sesterces – a very tidy sum – on a single dice pip. Augustus was something of an exception. Though losing 20,000 in one session, he staked his friends, often played for nuts instead of cash, and lavishly distributed free lottery tickets.

Roman dice were made from bones or ivory – Petronius's millionaire Trimalchio used gold and silver coins as counters to play the popular *Scriptæ Duodecim* (ancestor of backgammon). The pieces prefigured Las Vegas Craps terminology with their slang terms for individual throws – the highest was 'Venus', the lowest 'Dog' (often thought the origin of 'Snake-Eyes').

Ovid recommends letting the girl win at board games as a seduction technique – not always necessary since he elsewhere commends them as clever players. Another backgammon enthusiast was the old crone described in a Pliny letter as always sending grandson Quadratus out of the room to avoid corrupting him with this activity.





# Signals and noise

DAVID HAMBLING says that concerns about 5G are nothing new, but are not based on science

Scores of mobile phone masts have recently been attacked by arsonists, including one serving the new Nightingale hospital in Birmingham. Similar attacks have been reported in Belgium (pictured at right), Holland and Ireland. This campaign is driven by a belief that 5G phone signals are responsible for the spread of the Covid-19 virus (see p4+6). The CEO of Vodafone called the arsonists ‘deluded’; at the top of the WHO’s MythBusters page on coronavirus is the statement ‘5G mobile networks DO NOT spread COVID-19.’ So why would anyone believe otherwise?

Worries about the health effects of stray electromagnetic radiation predate the current pandemic, to before cellphones even existed. Concerns were raised about the dangers of high-voltage power lines, in particular an increased risk of childhood leukaemia. Any random distribution produces clusters; a perfectly even distribution is not random, but a cluster of cases by a power line naturally causes concern. A 1979 study appeared to find a correlation between power lines and leukaemia, but studies since then have failed to find a connection.

There is no established mechanism for such fields to produce cancer, but proving a negative is difficult. The debate continues 40 years later. Mobile phone signals were also a point of concern from the start, although early claims that heavy phone use would bring an epidemic of brain cancer have not been borne out.

5G, like other mobile phone signals, is carried by high-frequency radio waves, known as ‘non-ionising radiation’ because they are too weak to split molecules. There have been decades of research on such waves, particularly on possible effects of impact of high-power radio and radar on nearby personnel. So far researchers have struggled to find health effects apart from heating.

It is worth mentioning that 5G is not a particular signal on one wavelength. It is split among several radio bands, with different standards in different countries. 5G does use some higher frequencies than previous phone systems – known as millimetre waves – but in health terms the main difference is that these do not penetrate so far into the body.

5G scare stories do not follow a single narrative, but present a slew of different unrelated dangers. One set links 5G towers to mass bird deaths including some in a park in The Hague and others in North



## Celebrities have helped spread the 5G-coronavirus connection theory

Wales [FT388:4]. Another mentions a wave of student suicides at Bristol University. Another claims that councils are felling trees to hide the fact that 5G masts would kill them, yet another speculates that the reduction in insect numbers in recent years is caused by 5G. Such claims appeal to people who are suspicious of mainstream medicine and distrust the scientific establishment.

In 2019 an image claimed to be of a worker wearing a radiation hazmat suit to install 5G gear on a tower went viral, supposedly showing how dangerous the new technology is. Digging by fullfact.org revealed the worker was actually cleaning the tower with a hose – probably removing bird droppings – hence the protective suit, which would not have helped against radiation. Also, it was a 4G tower.

Chasing down the supposed science behind the link is like trying to net shadows. There are plenty of scientific-sounding ideas – sweat glands acting like antennae to channel 5G energy deep into your body – but these all disappear into wild speculation and unproven theories, with the only source often being anti-vaxxers and other groups with questionable scientific credentials.

Virologists and biologists are simply baffled when asked to explain a possible connection. It is like asking a doctor to explain the connection (established in folklore) between moonlight and hair growth. The current wave of fear seems to

have started with Thomas Cowan, an anti-vaccination campaigner from California, who explicitly associated 5G with coronavirus in an online video on 11 March. YouTube later took down the video, but not before it had literally gone viral. It might not have spread so fast if Russian state media outlet RT hadn’t claimed for years – with no obvious scientific basis – that 5G could cause cancer, autism, nosebleeds, and other serious health issues. Ironically enough, Russia is facing a serious coronavirus outbreak despite having only a basic 5G network of its own.

Believers said that coronavirus struck in Wuhan because of 5G masts, and that hotspots coincide with 5G use. But some hotspots, like Iran and Japan, have no 5G service at all. And one of the earliest and best-covered outbreaks was on the cruise liner Diamond Princess, which also lacks 5G.

Celebrities with millions of followers on social media but no particular expertise have helped spread the 5G-coronavirus connection theory. Actor Woody Harrelson, singer MIA and Boxer Amir Khan have all weighed in along with many others. It has even appeared in mainstream media. When the theory was trashed by a colleague on BBC’s *The One Show*, presenter Eamon Holmes questioned whether we should simply dismiss it. “What I don’t accept is mainstream media immediately slapping that down as not true when they don’t know it’s not true,” said Holmes. “It’s very easy to say it is not true because it suits the state narrative.”

This sets scientists the impossible task of proving that no cases of the virus are connected with 5G signals. The two may have grown at the same time, but this does not prove a causal connection. As has been observed, coronavirus numbers have also risen in line with the popularity of Baby Yoda. This does not mean they are related.

The other possibility is that 5G really is an invisible health-destroying, pandemic-causing superweapon. In which case one has to ask why the US authorities put the masts in their homeland rather than along the Mexican border. Or why Russian spies use old-fashioned Novichok rather than radio waves, or why the Chinese did not quell bothersome Hong Kong protesters with blasts of 5G. But when you go down this rabbit hole you find yourself in a whole alternate reality, with a completely different understanding of the world... and scientific plausibility is the least of your concerns.





# AIRPORT ENTITIES

Mothman sighting adds to tally of Illinois winged weirdies, while a mysterious humanoid creature prowls Lincolnshire's roads



ABOVE RIGHT: Chicago's O'Hare International Airport seems an unlikely location for an encounter with a Mothman-like winged humanoid entity, but this is exactly what one Mexican truck driver reported. ABOVE RIGHT: An artist's impression of Mothman. BELOW: Legs from a dismembered deer on the road near Humberside Airport.

## MOTHMAN'S RETURN

A trucker picking up a load at O'Hare International Airport, Chicago, Illinois, has reported seeing a large winged humanoid entity. The man was smoking a cigarette as his truck was being loaded, and was looking towards the airport runways when he noticed "something that looked like a large bird standing just outside of the fence by the parking lot. It was not hard to miss because two street lamps were nearby. It looked like a person with wings that were stretched out and flapping. It was walking away from the fence toward the open field and then began to flap its wings and disappeared." Asked to estimate the entity's size, the witness said he had been to this location many times, and knowing the fence to be about eight feet (2.5m) high, he could put the creature's height as at least seven feet tall (2m), with black wings six feet (1.8m) across.

The Mexican trucker said the being looked like a *demonio* (demon) or a *duende* (goblin), and was solid black with no eyes he could discern, but he assumed that it had its back towards him. He stated that it walked with a gait like a bird, and that its wings flapped as it moved toward a large field by the runways before disappearing into the night. He also described sensing the presence of evil, a characteristic of some earlier Mothman sightings. After it disappeared, the trucker said, he had crossed himself and prayed to the Virgin Mary for

## The trucker crossed himself and prayed to the Virgin Mary

protection. Asked if he had ever seen anything like this before, the man recalled having seen a solid black-winged creature circling an open field where he and some other children had been playing football; it had made a loud screeching noise before flying off into a nearby forest. He could not remember the date of this sighting, but recalled that it had been a week before a large magnitude 8.0 earthquake hit Mexico City. This tallies with previous Mothman appearances, which sometimes seemed linked to forthcoming disasters, most notably the collapse of Silver Bridge at Point Pleasant, West Virginia, in 1967 which claimed 46 lives.

Several other sightings were reported in the same area of Illinois in 2019: a large, winged humanoid accompanied by several other beings in Park Ridge, a giant-sized bat outside a Rosemont hotel, a tall creature with bright red eyes and large wings, again near the airport, and a 6ft (1.8m) tall creature flying over the Des Plaines River near Rosemont.

A series of 'Mothman' sightings within a few hundred miles'

radius of Lake Michigan, including every state bordering the great lake, were first recorded in the spring of 2017, but historical accounts are now being investigated as more people become aware of the phenomenon. Sightings of large winged beings around Lake Michigan have been reported at all hours, often in or near a park, and around water. Witnesses consistently describe a large, grey or black bat- or bird-like creature, sometimes with glowing red, yellow, or orange eyes; humanoid features such as arms and legs are often reported too. Sightings of anomalous giant birds, thunderbirds, pterosaurs, have also been reported in or near the same waterside locations (see FT386:10-11). For more on Mothman, see FT156:26-53; 187:44-48; 243:49-51; 346:48-49. [singularfortean.com](http://singularfortean.com), 6 Dec 2019.

## HUMBER BEAST

A mysterious creature was apparently seen running across a Lincolnshire road in February. The humanoid entity was spotted just off the A18 at Kirmington near Humberside Airport by Aaron Finch, co-presenter of the 'Realm of the Supernatural' podcast.

"He thought it was a ghost at first," said his co-presenter Lee Solway. "He could see it had a humanoid form but it was darker than night and it just moved across the road." A similar creature has been sighted by an elderly couple at nearby Caenby Corner. They reported "a black mass about 10ft [3m] tall," so big

that it blocked their view of the car in front's taillights. Solway said he and Finch returned to the scene the following day, where they found a rip in the fencing alongside the road, and two severed deer legs, but no blood. Finch also noticed that rabbits were avoiding that side of the road.

Solway noted there have been five or six sightings of a bizarre creature in the Lincolnshire region over the past 40 years. He likened the witnesses' descriptions – a half-man, half-deer entity with antlers, brown fur, a mane – to the shapeshifting 'puca' of Celtic folklore. The beast is said to be around 6ft (1.8m) tall, mostly walking on two legs and with glowing red eyes. (In folklore, the 'puca' sometimes presented itself as a horse, goat, cat, dog or hare, but can also take human form.)

One of these sightings was reported by a boy bunking off school: "He saw a creature step out of the cornfield," said Solway. It "looked at him and then bolted, bounding like a kangaroo." He added: "You also get Bigfoot sightings that run up and down the A15." [lincolnshirelive.co.uk](http://lincolnshirelive.co.uk), 22 Feb; [dailystar.co.uk](http://dailystar.co.uk), 9 Mar 2020.







## Travellers' tales

ALAN MURDIE dreams of the life of the open road and explores the ghostlore of Britain's gypsies



ABOVE: A romantic view of a gypsy encampment in an old postcard

"Gypsies and Travellers add to the culture and diversity of Suffolk through their story-telling, music and dance" is an uplifting line from a leaflet entitled "*Do you know about... Gypsies and Travellers*" circulating around Suffolk, promoted by the organisations 'Recycle for Suffolk', 'Positive About Disabled People' and the LGBT rights lobby group Stonewall.

Growing up in Suffolk, I must confess no personal experiences of such entertaining performances on the highways, verges and caravan sites of the county. Despite the obviously well-meaning thrust of this leaflet, I rather think the notion of the dancing and story-telling gypsy belongs more to an idealised and imaginary vision of the past rather than anything you are likely to encounter at encampments off the Bury St Edmunds A14 bypass, towards Ipswich.

True, some Suffolk gypsies did once tell my late father a story, and he ended up with a badly tarmacked drive. More significantly several folklorists have assured me

### The Boy's Grave is the best-known example of a crossroads burial in East Anglia

that real Romany people would tend to keep their traditional lore and songs to themselves, though thanks to the efforts of the international Gypsy Lore Society since 1888, a portion of these have achieved lasting preservation. But today this image is very much a romantic anachronism, owing more to depictions of rural life in English literature pre-1939, or Ruritanian scenes portrayed in Hammer films than the realities of gypsy and traveller existence in the UK of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But what about the gypsy contribution to ghost stories? Well that's an altogether different matter, both in Suffolk and many

other places.

One of the first local ghost tales I ever heard as a child concerned a reputed gypsy grave east of Newmarket. Known as the Boy's Grave, it is situated along the B1506 near Kentford and is the best-known example of a crossroads burial in East Anglia. It was a feature often pointed out to schoolchildren in the early 1970s when out on rambles or being driven by it, being visible as a small mound surrounded by bent hoops or osiers. The grave was always poignantly decorated with flowers and ribbons.

It was said to be the last resting place of a gypsy boy once employed to mind a flock of sheep, but who had fallen asleep in a ditch. The sheep strayed and, fearing the punishment that would follow from their loss, the boy killed himself in a fit of panic. Other more vindictive versions credited the gypsies with hanging the boy in retribution for carelessness.

In some versions, the boy was called



‘Joseph’ and around 1983 the grave acquired a small cross with the inscription ‘Joseph, the Unknown Gypsy Boy’ (believed to have been erected by a lady from Northolt). More recently, another tale avers a local squire hired a gypsy boy as a shepherd: local villagers resented this: they stole a sheep and let the gypsies take the blame. The squire drove the gypsies away and the boy hanged himself in shame. However, as my friend and leading wayside grave expert Robert Halliday points out, the stories are at variance with gypsy life: gypsies are excellent horsemen, but do not keep sheep.

The ghost story attaching to the site, which I first heard in 1972 while at primary school, was that at night an eerie force emanated from the grave, affecting cyclists who rode by the spot, pushing them across the road or forcing them to dismount.

Even at a tender age I thought this was a rather dubious ghost story, and half-suspected it was the invention of a schoolmate, but I later found it mentioned in several books. Eric Maple’s *Supernatural England* (1977) adds an ‘uncanny chill’ is also experienced at times. The colours of ribbons looped around the grave were said to predict the colours of winning horses at the Newmarket races.

Who exactly tended the grave was a mystery, but it was popularly assumed to be maintained by gypsies or roadmen, though various local volunteers also came forward. One elderly lady I spoke with at Fornham St Martin in 1978 told me that during World War II she had regularly walked by the grave about 6.30am and observed fresh

bunches of flowers laid overnight; even the Communist *Daily Worker* newspaper was moved to mention this odd custom (13 July 1949). By 1976 even wilder stories spread of a policeman keeping an overnight vigil at the grave and witnessing flowers materialise by themselves!

As a marginalised community, gypsies evoke a substantial ghostlore, often signalling the harsh treatment meted out to them or reflecting their legendary status as an outsider race possessing arcane and esoteric knowledge. Gypsies have been archetypal outsiders ever since arriving in the British Isles, first in Scotland around 1505. Their nomadic and rigorously independent habits have long attracted official censure and punishment in law. Tudor vagrancy laws condemned gypsies to being “whipped and burnt through the gristle of the right eare with a hot Yron” and even made it a capital felony for being one, or for harbouring them. Later legislation criminalised them as ‘rogues’ on multiple grounds, especially if apprehended practising certain niche trades, with provisions forbidding “unlicensed pedlars, fencers, jugglers, bear-wards, minstrels, fortune-tellers and gamesters”. These categories were packed into compendia of miscellaneous offences ensnaring all “persons wandering abroad in alehouses, barns, outhouses or in the open air, not giving a good account of themselves” under the Vagrancy Acts 1744 and 1824.

An echo of these times is found in a story from Bexhill, East Sussex, where, in May each year, phantom gypsy caravans are said to roll into the Old Town towards the

site of the former Bell Inn where a theatre once existed and attracted travelling players and minstrels. The website *Discover Bexhill* records: “Today, many people claim that the same colourfully decorated caravans appear during early May, clattering down the street and making their stops... Whether the modern-day locals are pleased to see them, or whether they remain suspicious of the travelling troupes, is not entirely clear.” (Source: <https://www.discoverbexhill.com/articles/ghosts-of-bexhill>)

Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824 targeted gypsy occult knowledge and psychic arts catching “every person pretending or professing to tell fortunes, or using any subtle craft, means, or device, by palmistry or otherwise, to deceive and impose on any of his Majesty’s subjects”. Section 4 was later infamously deployed against psychics and Spiritualist mediums, even those with settled homes, when charged with the fraudulent simulation of phenomena (see ‘Spiritualists in the Dock’ by Alan Murdie in *Two Worlds*, May 1999). This section was repealed in 1989, but as late as 1996 the Fraudulent Mediums Act 1951 was used against a gypsy fortune-teller living on a campsite in Gloucestershire. Meanwhile gypsies eventually achieved a margin of legal protection with legislation concerning mobile homes and caravan sites, together with a series of test cases in the courts.

In contrast to official attitudes, the open-air gypsy lifestyle, never fixed to a single locale and with hints of mysterious powers and arts, drew radical literary and artistic admirers, inspiring themes for writers



ABOVE: The Boy’s Grave near Kentford, near Newmarket. The cross suggests it is the burial spot of ‘Joseph, the Unknown Gypsy Boy’.





# GHOSTWATCH

and artists. William Hazlitt (1778-1830) wrote: “How I love to see the camps of gypsies, and to sigh my soul into that sort of life”. Wandering novelist George Borrow (1803-1881), whose ghost is said to walk at Oulton Broad in Suffolk, learned the Romany tongue and idolised gypsies in his classics *Lavengro* and *Romany Rye*. Rural writer and ghost hunter James Wentworth Day (1899-1983), whose pronouncements on racial topics were often considered provocative and offensive even by 1950s standards, proved another surprising fan, revering gypsies for their independence, horsemanship and for preserving archaic hunting and survival skills.

Across Britain gypsies have been blamed for cursing everything from beer in pubs (see Ghostwatch **FT259:16-17**) to Birmingham City football stadium (not exorcised until 2016 – see ‘Birmingham City’s Gypsy Curse of St Andrew finally lifted by priest’, *Birmingham Live*, 27 Sept 2016 and **FT191:26-28**).

An old oak tree which once stood at the Market Place at Burton and which was used for hangings became known as the ‘cursed oak’ after a gypsy man was strung up from one of its branches, prompting his angry mother to put a curse on all surrounding buildings. Ghost walk leader Chris Campbell reports: “People have seen the faces of the people hung from that tree during our walks.” (*Derbyshire Live*, 25 Feb 2019).

Elvet Bridge in Durham is haunted by the ghostly sound of pipes played by Jamie



## An entire encampment of phantom travellers was seen sitting around a fire talking

Allan, a gypsy musician who expired on 13 December 1810 after languishing for seven years in the city’s prison, awaiting transportation following his conviction for horse stealing in 1803. He laments that his royal pardon arrived four days too late to free him. (*Northern Echo*, 16 Feb 2011; <https://www.thisisdurham.com/inspire-me/durhams-top-10s/ghosts-and-legends>).

Otherwise spectral gypsies prove silent and anonymous presences in the landscape. An entire encampment of phantom travellers sitting around a fire talking was seen near Wheatcroft in Kirkcudbrightshire by a local hairdresser, Mr William MacKannett, in 1945. He was cycling home through the twilight when he noticed the group with three or four caravans behind them. Only on reaching home afterwards did he realise the scene had been visible without a single sound, like a silent film. Early the next morning he returned and found no trace whatsoever of any encampment or ashes from any fires. (In *Phantom Footsteps* (1959) by Alasdair Alpin Macgregor).

The ghost of a gypsy man in shiny breeches and a pointed green hat moves annually across Farway Common near Honiton, Devon, and was seen on Christmas Eve 1969 (‘The Christmas Gypsy Ghost’ in *Mostly Ghostly* (1976) by A Farquharson-Coe). The hue of his hat might hint at earlier elfin beliefs, but he is described as very tall.

Many gypsy spectres are female, often obscure victims of hostility and violence. An unknown murdered gypsy lady haunts the Theatre Royal London (*Ghosts Over England* (1953) by R Thurston Hopkins). Only the first name of ‘Sally-in-the-Woods’ is known, attached to a young girl wearing a white nightgown gliding through Brown’s Folly Woods near Bath, Somerset, and over the A636. She is said to be a gypsy girl imprisoned in an 18<sup>th</sup> century tower and left to starve. (*D.Mirror*, 27 Oct; *Sun*, 28 Oct 2017).

The Grey Lady of Levens Hall near Kendal in Cumbria is considered as being “the ghost of a gypsy who in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century was turned away when begging food”. She has been seen wandering the grounds, on the bridge over the river and inside the house itself. Before her last breath, she shrieked a curse: “No son will inherit the hall until the River Kent flows no more and a white fawn is born in the park.” No male child was born in the family holding the hall for nearly two centuries until December 1896, when Walter Alan Bagot was born when the river froze and a white deer was born into the herd of black deer in the park. A white ear from the deer is preserved in a scrapbook at the Hall. The mother-in-law of the present owner, interviewed in 2011, recalled seeing the



**TOP:** The story of Jamie Allan, a gypsy piper who died after languishing for seven years in Durham Gaol. **ABOVE:** The city’s Elvet Bridge is said to be haunted by the ghostly sound of Allan’s pipes.



Grey Lady walking in the grounds. Earlier sightings occurred on the bridge in 1971 and 1972, posing a hazard to motorists. (*Phantom Ladies* (1976) by Andrew Green; *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 Dec 2011).

At the Coombe Abbey Hotel, Coventry, a ghostly gypsy dressed in rags haunts the area around the former stable block. According to two visiting mediums in summer 2018, she was a stable hand in the days when Coombe Abbey was a private house, possibly named 'Matilda', and who suffered abuse. Other accounts declare only her footsteps are heard crossing the cobbles of the yard. (*Hinckley Times*, 30 Oct 2016; *Sun*, 2 July 2018).

Recently, far too many ghost hunters have sought a glimpse of a pinkish glow appearing in the reputedly "most haunted village" of Pluckley, Kent. The glow is said to represent an elderly gypsy watercress seller who set herself alight whilst smoking her pipe. She supposedly appears on the banks of the River Beult and within Dering Woods. By autumn 2017 crowds of optimistic visitors were leaving rubbish and trampling rare plants to the point that owners posted security guards to restrict access. (*D.Telegraph*, 4 Oct 2017).

A phantom gypsy woman rides "a decrepit brown horse" near the Chinthurst Woods, Guildford in Surrey. She was witnessed by a local BEA pilot in June 1971 as he drove his young daughter home from dancing lessons; unusually, while he could see both the woman and her steed, his daughter saw only the horse (in *Our Haunted Kingdom* (1973) and *Unknown Ghosts of the South East* (2005) by Andrew Green).

The ghost of a 'gypsy-type girl' wanders a passage between two roads near the petrol station at Fulwood in Nethergreen, Sheffield, according to the claim of a woman who contacted *Sheffield Forum*, stating she had "seen her many times" (*Sheffield Forum*, 8 Mar 2004). A suspected gypsy ghost lady in a long-skirt and bonnet, seen crossing Westlands Lane at Benacre, Wiltshire, was witnessed



LEFT: The haunted vardo caravan in the Gordon Boswell Romany Museum.

retains the spirit of a gypsy girl who is heard giggling. Gordon Boswell, the late founder of the museum, stated in 2004 that he purchased the van from an old lady who offered it to him on condition he would "take the little girl too".

Boswell thought she meant a doll, but was informed the wagon was haunted by a small girl coming out to play on its steps at dusk. Undeterred, he bought the van and claimed, "I got the wagon plus a ghost. I've seen her myself." Source: 'Gordon and the Ghost' by Sarah Farley [www.tes.com/news/gordon-and-ghost](http://www.tes.com/news/gordon-and-ghost). 13 Feb 2004; *Spalding Today*, 28 June 2013).

Elliot O'Donnell reported that a group of gypsies camping one autumn evening at Brockley Comb, near Bristol, Somerset, fled at the appearance of a phantom coach driven by a headless coachman, perhaps fearful of its dreadful effect upon those

beholding it as "it shatters their nervous system" (*Dangerous Ghosts* (1952) by Elliot O'Donnell).

In 1977, plans by Cambridgeshire County Council to convert a patch of land near Whaddon Gap north of Royston into a permanent caravan pitch for gypsies initially failed to find favour with many travellers who shunned it, believing it cursed or haunted. It was claimed that a bomber plane had crashed there in World War II killing three crew, and that the body of a tramp and the burnt remains of a murdered local gypsy were found there in the mid-1960s.

As reported by a local farmer, rumours circulated that a gypsy couple who stayed overnight found their dog cowering in fear, its hairs erect in terror. Then a smoky mist appeared followed by a burning smell and a horrible scream. This was repeated the following night and the gypsies swiftly decamped (pers. comm. Robert Halliday, 6 Oct 2010).

Otherwise it seems, as a general rule, gypsies are not the ones for telling you stories of ghosts if you are an outsider, but they certainly feature in plenty of them.

on three occasions during the 1970s by a Mr Graham Hunt, including one Sunday evening in October 1978 when he described the air becoming dreadfully cold. This figure and another apparition of an old woman both appeared near a spot where gypsies reputedly buried their dead (*More Ghosts and Legends of the Wiltshire Countryside* (1984) by Kathleen Wiltshire). Another reputedly haunted gypsy grave supposedly lies along Green Lane at Barrowden, Rutland. In 1977 a lady from Morcott told the Local History Society that her dog would never pass this spot without making a detour. It is said to be the grave of a gypsy man who died in a fatal fight in his community around 1880 (in *Lore of the Land* (2008) by Jacqueline Simpson and Jennifer Westwood).

It is a rarity for gypsies to be cited as witnesses in ghost stories. Because caravans can be haunted as much as static dwellings, gypsies ceremonially burn vans after death, a custom still observed (see *D.Mail*, 25 May 2017). A surviving specimen of an antique gypsy caravan at the Gordon Boswell Romany Museum at Spalding in Lincolnshire reputedly





## FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

No dolphins in Venice but cougars in Santiago, plus BVM fakery and Gimp Man still at large



ABOVE: A cougar photographed on the streets of Santiago, Chile, on 24 March. The now quiet city has had numerous sightings.

### NATURE RETURNS [FT392:7]



Reports that dolphins may now be seen in Venice as a result of coronavirus quarantine measures in Italy now appear to have been fake news. A video that supposedly depicts the cetaceans swimming in the city's famous canals has been shown to have been taken 750km (465 miles) away.

- The mountain goats who invaded the north Wales town of Llandudno and became a social media sensation now have competition. Three peacocks have been spotted in nearby Bangor, strolling down the city's now-deserted high street.
- A cougar has been captured wandering through a residential area of Santiago, the capital of Chile. Since coronavirus lockdown measures were enacted, two other cougars have been spotted in the quiet city, one having been found inside an apartment complex. It is

thought that drought in the Santiago foothills has forced the animals to venture further afield. "They sense less noise and are also looking for new places to find food and some get lost and appear in the cities," said the director of Chile's livestock and agriculture service. *BBC News*, 7 Apr 2020.

### SOMERSET'S GIMP MAN [FT384:24]



The 'gimp man' who has been terrorising Somerset villages for over a year is still at large, despite two arrests. Wearing a full latex black suit, the 'gimp' has been confronting victims like Abi Conroy, 23, of Claverham, who recalls a man wearing fetish clothing, "grunting and breathing heavily." She said: "He kept coming towards me and was touching his groin... As I tried to take a step back he was right in front of my face and he put his leg forward." Abi's wife Pip claims the sightings have been going on for four years: "He'd let himself into people's gardens and has been

seen humping their grass or breathing on their window sills, strange things like that." A police hunt using a helicopter and sniffer dogs led to the arrest of two men, but they were later released without charge. *dailymirror.co.uk*, 11 Feb 2020,

### BLEEDING BVM FAKED [FT390:10]



Claims of bleeding statues, apparitions and other miracles at St Mark Catholic Church, Argyle, Texas, have been made since 2017 by a group styling itself 'Mystical Rose – Our Lady of Argyle'. Bishop Michael Olson of the Diocese of Fort Worth had stated the claims to be false. In addition, sculptor and painter Suzanne Stack revealed that she had been cleaning a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and found a latex substance on it. She suggested that the false visionary had previously painted the statue as if "there was something pulsing out of the heart area," and immediately sent Bishop Olson a letter to explain, saying the

paint "was definitely applied" and that "this ain't no miracle." *churchpop.com*, 28 Aug 2019.

### STARLING APOCALYPSE [FT388:4]



North Wales police say the mystery of 225 starlings found dead on an Anglesey road has been solved after tests by the Animal and Plant Health Agency. Examinations on 41 of the birds found no evidence of avian flu or poisons, and the deaths were caused by the birds colliding with the road or nearby bushes. A police spokesman said they had gone into a dive murmuration together, being unable to pull back before hitting the tarmac, and that this was "probably consistent with the birds avoiding either severe weather or a raptor in the area". He added: "I hope that this will put a line under this. It's quite a common thing and happens all around the world." *BBC News*, 13 Mar 2020.

### SCAM DIGEST [FT391:28-29]



Fortune teller Tracey Milanovich, who owns Tracy's Psychic Palm Reader, was charged with larceny, obtaining property by deception and witness intimidation in December 2019, after a customer complained to police. Following an initial Tarot card consultation, Ms Milanovich, 37, told the client that her 10-year-old daughter was possessed by a demon, and that she required a great deal of money to banish it. The customer was tricked into handing over cash and household items such as towels and bedding. Ms Milanovich is accused of having conned clients out of sums up to \$71,000 (£54,300). *nbcnews.com*, 3 Jan; *[AP]* 5 Jan 2020.



• A Scottish police officer tried to persuade a colleague to leave the force by masquerading as an oil industry executive. PC Amanda Reilly, 31, had met PC Laura McWhirter, 32, at Police Scotland's treatment centre in Auchterarder, Perthshire, in 2016, where they became friends. After Ms McWhirter told Reilly she was unhappy in her job as a constable, Reilly told her she had formerly worked as an accountant in Aberdeen and knew a businessman called Peter Aird, managing director of Kingdom Drilling.

Between May and September 2016, Reilly faked dozens of emails, ostensibly from Mr Aird. They held a promise of a new job for Ms McWhirter, who underwent medical screening, learnt to swim for offshore safety, and, on the basis of the high wages she would be earning in the oil industry, purchased an expensive Mercedes Benz car costing £319 per month. Ms McWhirter's brother was also duped, completing offshore training with the expectation of a new and lucrative job.

Ms McWhirter asked repeatedly to speak to Mr Aird directly, but found the proposed meetings or telephone conversations were always scheduled for dates when she was unavailable. Becoming suspicious, she managed to contact the real Peter Aird on Facebook, who denied all knowledge of Reilly and said he had not offered anybody a job. She eventually confronted Reilly at her home, in December 2016, when Reilly admitted she had made it all up and that her previous role in the oil industry as an accountant was a fiction. Reilly was reported to police bosses, and now faces the sack.

Ms McWhirter handed in her resignation from Police Scotland after eight years' service. "When it all came out I was left questioning if she was even in the police because of the lies she told me," Ms

McWhirter said. "It is one of the most bizarre things I've ever heard and I can't believe it happened to me."

Reilly, of Tayport, Fife, appeared at Hamilton Sheriff Court, pleading guilty to having stalked Ms McWhirter between May and September 2016. *thetimes.co.uk*, 19 Dec 2019.

### 'OUMUAMUA AGAIN [FT362:24; 363:13]



'Oumuamua, the mysterious interstellar visitor that passed through our Solar

System in 2017, may have been a fragment of a planet, according to a new study. Various thought to be an asteroid, a comet or even an alien spacecraft, a study by astronomers Yun Zhang and Douglas Lin, detailed in a *Nature Astronomy* article, suggests the elongated object may be a shard of a planet ripped apart by its star's gravity.

Zhang and Lin developed computer simulations in which planetary bodies get too close to their parent stars. If repeatedly coming within about 600,000km (372,000 miles) of their parent star (nearly 80 times as close as Mercury gets to our Sun), the star's gravity shreds the objects and flings the resulting fragments into space. This might explain 'Oumuamua's unusual shape, its tumbling motion, and its increased speed as it left the Solar System; the simulated planetary shards tumble and tend to be cigar-shaped, like 'Oumuamua. Such a fragment may also contain ice at its centre, the researchers said. Such buried ice could have produced water vapour as 'Oumuamua was heated by our Sun. This vapour could have escaped through porous rock, acting as a natural rocket, propelling 'Oumuamua faster as it rounded the Sun. *nature.com*, 13 Apr 2020.

# MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

## 249: WILL YOU TAKE A WEE SNACK?



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

### The myth

Years ago, they took a bowl of peanuts that had been left out on a bar for customers to help themselves, and they (science people of some sort) analysed it in their laboratory, probably in Canada somewhere, and they found the nuts contained traces of the urine of 27 different people. Or some other number, or some other unwelcome substances, or somewhere in the USA, or it was restaurant mints instead of pub nuts, or "different types of urine", whatever that might mean.

### The "truth"

There are plenty of ifs and buts in this story, but one aspect of it does seem to be completely clear: the famous "pee nuts" study never took place. Lots of people have gone looking for it, in both the scientific and the mundane literature, and nobody's ever found the faintest whiff or trace of it. However, fans of non-existent research will not be surprised to hear that various local authorities around the world have acted on its supposed conclusions – for instance, by ordering restaurants to individually wrap the after-dinner mints they keep in a bowl by the till. Media people do occasionally cause bar snacks to be lab-tested, in the hope of proving or disproving the 27 urines tale. The results are generally unexciting; there are indeed traces of all manner of yuck from inadequately washed hands, but at concentrations far too low to be of any significance. The highest (still very low) risk of infection probably comes instead from people touching their faces, and then transferring cold and flu germs to the snacks.

### Sources

[www.sarasotamagazine.com/eat-and-drink/2017/11/how-sanitary-are-communal-bar-snacks](http://www.sarasotamagazine.com/eat-and-drink/2017/11/how-sanitary-are-communal-bar-snacks); <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/11/toilet/>

### Mythchaser

A reader, possibly a cricketing parson, wants a final answer to this: was The Almighty (multi-disciplinary sporting champion CB Fry) *actually* offered the throne of Albania, or is this legend an exaggeration, a romantic embellishment, or a misunderstanding?







KARL SHUKER ponders pandas, mulls over Madagascan moggies and considers the crane



### PARTITIONING PANDAS

Back in the traditional age of zoological classification, long before genetic analyses to identify species had come into existence, the giant panda *Ailuropoda melanoleuca* and the red or lesser panda *Ailurus fulgens* had tormented taxonomists for decades as to what they actually were – bears, raccoons, or something separate from both, and possibly from each other too? No one was certain. Nowadays, DNA analyses and the like have confirmed that the giant panda is a bear, whereas the red panda belongs to an entirely separate family from all others, with itself the only surviving representative.

However, following the most comprehensive genetic study ever conducted on this singular species by a research team at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which analysed DNA from 65 red pandas representing seven separate populations, it turns out that there is not just one red panda species after all, but two. The study revealed substantial, 22-million-year-old genetic divergences between Chinese red pandas (native to northern Myanmar plus southeastern Tibet, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in China) and Himalayan red pandas (native to Nepal, India, Bhutan, and southern Tibet in China). In terms of morphological differences, the Chinese red panda's face fur's colour is redder with less white on it, plus the Chinese red panda's tail rings are more distinct than the Himalayan red panda's, with the dark rings being darker red and the pale rings whiter. As a result, the two forms had long been classified as separate subspecies, but this new study confirms that they are sufficiently different

genetically too in order to warrant elevation to the level of full species, thereby doubling the number of *Ailurus* species now known to exist today. [www.newsweek.com/red-panda-two-species-study-1489494](http://www.newsweek.com/red-panda-two-species-study-1489494), 27 Feb 2020.

### MADAGASCAN MOGGY MYSTERIES

Although cats are not native to Madagascar, they exist in abundance across this large island, brought here by humans at least as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Where these cats were brought from, however, as well as their precise taxonomic nature, have long been contentious subjects. Indeed, there has even been speculation that some of the larger, more impressive tabby-striped specimens spied in the wild here were not simply feral domestics but actually bona fide specimens of the African wildcat *Felis lybica*.

In February 2020, a *Conservation Genetics* paper revealed the answers to these twin feline mysteries. It presented the findings of a team of researchers, including Missouri University cat genomics expert Dr Leslie Lyons, who had been conducting comparative DNA analyses using blood samples from specimens of these cats and from various feline specimens from around the world, which revealed the closest match with the Madagascan moggies to be domestic cats, and specifically from Arabian Sea locales. Consequently, the team proposed that perhaps as far back in time as 1,000 years ago, some such Arabian domestics had made their way to Madagascar by stowing



LEFT: A red panda. ABOVE: A forest cat is seen on a camera trap in Madagascar's Beza Mahafaly Special Reserve. BELOW: Cranes may become a less unusual sight in Britain.

away on Arab trade ships, and over time establishing thriving feral populations here. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10592-020-01261-x> 28 Feb 2020; *Science*, v.367, p.1178, 10 Mar 2020.

### CRANING FOR ATTENTION

A bird that commands attention for the simple fact that at over 4ft (1.2m) tall it is difficult to overlook is the common crane *Grus grus*, and for especially good reason lately. This is because, after having been exterminated in Britain by hunting and habitat destruction during the 1600s, this stately long-necked species has recently made a dramatic comeback, from two quite separate causes. Firstly, in 1979 a few individuals from mainland Europe returned to their former wetland home in Norfolk and began to breed, gradually increasing in numbers during the next 40 years. And secondly, conservation work to improve wetlands elsewhere in England eventually encouraged this greatly welcomed prodigal bird to spread further afield.

In April 2020, the UK Crane Working Group was pleased to announce that crane numbers in Britain have reached their highest for more than 400 years, with 56 breeding pairs here last year and 26 chicks successfully reared. If this trend continues, with crane numbers increasing and its geographical range continuing to expand, it seems likely that wildlife enthusiasts in the UK may soon not have to crane their own necks too hard in order to catch sight of this elegant bird here once again. *D.Mail*, 23 April 2020.





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## FEAR STALKS THE LAND | Vampires in Malawi, gassers in Zambia, a black giant in Kerala and 'shroud ghosts' in Indonesia

### MALAWI BLOODSUCKER SCARE

People in northern Malawi are living in fear of bloodsucking assailants. To date, 12 persons have been killed by vigilante groups who mobilised in March following rumours of a bloodsucking cult. The latest eight victims of these mobs were from Mozambique, travelling to Tanzania via Malawi's northern region. "A group of vigilantes apprehended them, but because of the language barrier, they could not understand each other," said regional spokesman Peter Kalaya. "So the vigilantes attacked them. When the police arrived... two were already dead." Police managed to save one man but the rest were murdered.

President Peter Mutharika condemned the killings in a national address. People had "been brutally killed in a mob justice because of being suspected to be bloodsuckers," he said. "These rumours are baseless and deliberately created." He described the rumours and attacks as a "political strategy" designed to create "fear and panic" before this year's forthcoming election, a re-run of last year's presidential elections, when, he said, similar

scaremongering had been rife. And in 2017, similar mob attacks took place following bloodsucker rumours, with nine people dead and 250 arrests.

In the Chitipa district, women have been sleeping overnight in a church guarded by men, and people walk about in groups wherever they go. Despite police dismissing their claims, a local headman insisted the terror was real. "Last week about two women were sucked blood," he insisted. "Things are not as they may seem to others out there. We have seen these terrorists with our eyes here in Chitipa."

To date, police have arrested 117 people on suspicion of involvement in the vigilante groups. "In the past two weeks," a police spokesman said, "some individuals have resorted to mob justice; blocking roads, attacking strangers and vandalising property of some business people accusing them of either being bloodsuckers or harbouring such people." He warned the public that those involved would be arrested and prosecuted accordingly. Police and police stations have also been attacked by mobs suspecting them to be in league with the cult.

Bishop Mathews Mtumbuka

of Karonga diocese, in a radio address to Malawians, has called for calm, saying there are no bloodsuckers in the country. "It is unfortunate that women with children on their back, spend sleepless nights for fear of bloodsuckers," he said. "I want to assure you. There are no such suckers in Malawi. Do not fear rumours." And the bishop issued a warning: "I hear that most people are sleeping in groups. This is bad. It would fuel the spread of the real beast that is in our midst, coronavirus."

The bloodsucker cult panic has affected Malawi's National Statistics Office (NSO), who have been forced to postpone a survey which entailed the collection of blood samples in some districts. An NSO spokesman said: "With the bloodsuckers issue... that would be putting the lives of our data collectors at risk." He explained that some collectors had been severely attacked in Nkhata Bay and their vehicle smashed by an angry mob.

Police investigations have concluded there are no persons in Malawi involved in blood sucking activities, announced Central Region Acting Commissioner of Police, Evalister Chisale. One man claiming to have been a

victim "actually had a history of nose bleeding," she explained, and that "after undergoing tests, his blood level was normal and nothing to back his claim was found. In fact, he later confessed that he was lying and that someone had sent him to spread the rumour." *malawi24.com, 27+29 Mar+9 Apr; theguardian.com, nyasatimes.com, 9+29 Apr 2020.*

### ZAMBIA GASSING ATTACKS

Since January 2020, Zambian citizens have been subjected to a wave of gassing attacks. At the start of March, over 511 crimes related to the use of poisonous substances had been reported, with over 1,687 victims.

One of the earliest incidents occurred at Chingola, a Zambian mining town, where residents were terrorised by a gang of criminals who, it was claimed, had sprayed unidentified chemicals inside peoples' homes. In January, police arrested seven people suspected of being members of the gang, and gunned down an eighth man as he ran from police. Noxious chemicals were found in a bag he had discarded. However, further gassing incidents were reported in February; six families in nearby Kalalushi were sprayed with what was described as a poisonous substance, and local people lynched three suspects, leaving one dead. The attacks had begun in Zambia's Copperbelt region to the north of the country, near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), but on 10 February, nine family members living in the capital city Lusaka's George Township reported having been gassed in their homes at night, with 32 boarding school pupils also claiming to have been gassed while asleep.

On 11 February, police chief Kakoma Kanganja announced that officers had full knowledge of the chemicals being employed, but refused to give details on the grounds that "disclosing the contents of the chemicals may mean giving information to other criminals". The chemical



ABOVE: Jamiya Bauleni, a woman who claims that she had her blood sucked in October 2017. Now, another vampire panic has spread through Malawi, with 12 dead at the hands of vigilantes who fear the re-emergence of the bloodsucking cult.





spray is said to cause drowsiness, dizziness and, in some cases, death. Victims describe an overwhelming pungent odour, the smell of battery acid, followed by breathing difficulty and a choking sensation, often requiring medical attention.

Police have warned the public not to take the law into their own hands following vigilante attacks on innocent persons. At least 43 people have been killed; in one instance, residents of Kanyama Compound set upon and killed two suspects said to have been seen spraying a chemical through partially closed windows of local flats; one was beaten to death and the other set alight. Rioting mobs have also attacked police stations, damaged vehicles and injured police officers.

Although there is doubtless an element of mass hysteria at play, there appears to be credible evidence that criminals really are using poisonous chemicals; police have apprehended several people with noxious substances on their persons. One case saw the arrest of a 14-year-old boy on suspicion of having sprayed a chemical in a Lusaka school classroom. Four pupils were taken to hospital for treatment following the attack. Other schools have also been gassed.

A senior police official issued a denial that the gassings were connected to ritual killings where human body parts are removed and used for magical purposes. Deputy Inspector General for Operations Bonny Kapeso stated that none of the bodies recovered so far bore any evidence of mutilation.

As a result of the ensuing civil unrest, riots and lynchings, the army has been deployed in Zambian towns and cities. Rumours that the ruling Patriotic Front (PF) party is behind the gassings have been circulating, with MPs, bishops and others suggesting the attacks are a distraction from PF's plundering of national resources, an attempt to stir up civil unrest so as to postpone elections scheduled for 2021, or, more vaguely, a deliberate fomenting of mass panic and fear. The government has hinted that the opposition are responsible, and have suggested the overthrow of the government is the gassers' objective, but as



ABOVE: Volunteers Deri Setyawan and Septian Febriyanto sit on a bench in Kepuh village dressed as *pocong* or 'shroud ghosts', in an attempt to scare people into staying at home amid the spread of coronavirus. BELOW: Banath Pullara – not the 'spring man'.

several arrestees have been PF officials, regime change seems an unlikely motive. Some have queried how ordinary Zambians have been able to acquire expensive chemicals used in the attacks.

At the time of writing, the attacks continue, with 12 individuals appearing in Lusaka Magistrate's Court charged with 15 counts of having committed "a terrorist act intending to cause death or serious harm... by releasing into the environment dangerous, hazardous, harmful substances, toxic chemicals among other toxins". On 5 March, President Edgar Lungu assured the nation that those behind the gassings as well as the vigilante mobs would be "crushed and buried". *daily-mail.com*, 28+29 Jan, 10-28 Feb, 2+6+7+18 Mar; *zambiareports.com*, 24 Mar 2020.

## KERALA'S 'SPRING MAN'

Messages and videos circulating on social media have spread fear among the population of Kerala. Many of them contained a photo that supposedly depicted a dark-skinned man sitting in a vehicle. He appeared tired and sweaty, and looked straight into the camera. Social media comments suggested this was the 'spring man' or 'black man', who is said to be over eight feet (2.5m) tall, able to climb up palm trees very quickly, and may be a thief.



However, a tug of war competitor and player from the Malappuram district came forward. Banath Pullara had received calls from friends alerting him to the photo doing the rounds. Banath said: "The photo that is circulating was taken around the time of a competition. Before some competitions we have to reduce our weight. So we don't eat for a few days, and remain inside closed vehicles to sweat, and lose weight. The photo was taken at that time. But seeing the messages circulating along with it, my mother asked me whether I go for robberies in the name of competitions." *thenewsminute.com*, 7 Apr 2020.

## INDONESIAN POCONG PATROL

Officials in an Indonesian village have adopted an unusual method of deterring people from leaving their homes during the coronavirus pandemic, deploying people masquerading as ghosts to patrol the streets. More specifically, they appear as *pocong* ('shroud-

ghosts'), souls of the dead trapped in their shrouds and unable to move on to the next world.

The ghostly figures in Kepuh village on the island of Java are dressed in white shrouds, with powdered faces and kohl-rimmed eyes. These mysterious figures jump out at unsuspecting passers-by at night, before disappearing.

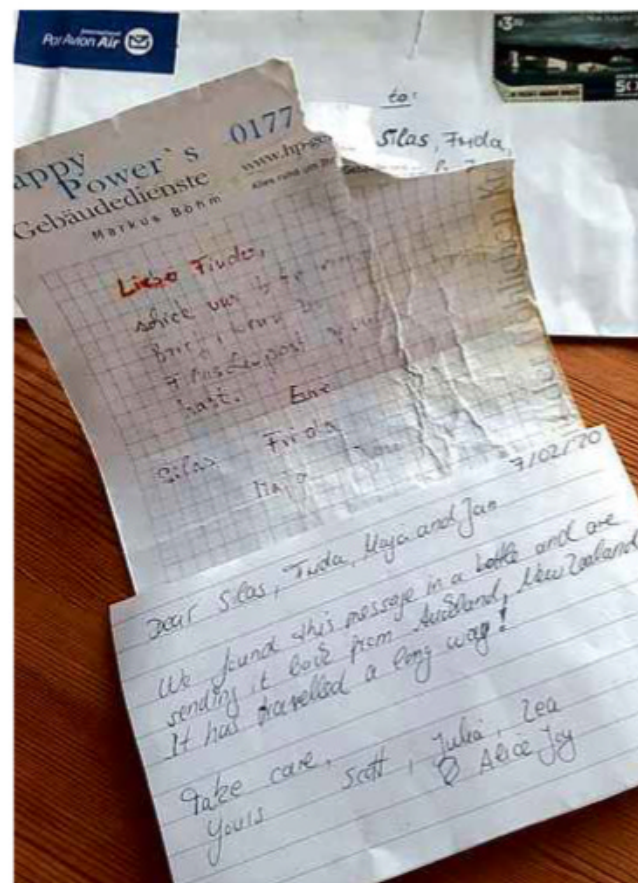
"We wanted to be different and create a deterrent effect because *pocong* are spooky and scary," said Anjar Pancaningtyas, head of a village youth group that coordinated with the police to promote social distancing during the pandemic. Unfortunately, when the fake *pocong* first appeared, they had the opposite effect, bringing people outdoors to catch a glimpse of the apparitions. The organisers subsequently changed their strategy, and now launch surprise *pocong* patrols.

Currently with 4,241 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 373 deaths, Indonesia has the highest rates in Asia after China. President Joko Widodo has resisted a national lockdown, but is urging people to practise social distancing and good hygiene. In Kepuh, the ghost patrols appear to be working. "Since the *pocong* appeared, parents and children have not left their homes," said resident Karno Supadmo, "And people will not gather or stay on the streets after evening prayers." [R] 3 Apr 2020.



## STRANGE CONTINENT

Unfazed by Brexit, **ULRICH MAGIN** scours the papers for the weirdest news stories from across Europe...



ABOVE LEFT: The ice bomb and crater in Wattenscheid, Germany. ABOVE RIGHT: The letter from New Zealand and the Gogos children's original message.

### ICE BOMBS OVER EUROPE

Even more than lake monsters or UFOs, ice falls are an archetypal fortean phenomenon. On the afternoon of 28 December 2019, a block of ice crashed through the roof of 45-year-old farmer Josef Weingand's shed at Warngau near Miesbach, south of Munich in Germany. Weingand heard a loud bang, but thought a door had closed, and only noticed the damage to the roof at 4pm. However, he could pinpoint the exact time of the impact – 12.17pm – as the ice hit the solar panels of the building, interrupting power production. The ice meteor was smashed into several pieces by the aluminium roof beams. Weingand believes the ice came from a Ryanair plane, which was in the area between 12.10 and 1pm; he wished to file a complaint with the police, who at first refused but then accepted due to media pressure. The Ryanair flight was from Palma de Mallorca to Berlin-Schönefeld, but it appears there were at least two

additional planes in the general area. *merkur.de*, 1 Jan 2020.

On 27 January 2019, another block of ice impacted in a garden in Wattenscheid, Ruhr, Germany, leaving a crater. Around 8.30pm, a couple heard a hissing noise, then a mighty bang. They went outside and discovered a 30cm by 20cm, 15cm-deep hole just 1.5m from the wall of their home. The next day, the couple called the police, who took a snap of the 'ice bomb', now reduced in size. Although the report itself mentions no bad smell, police suspected an aircraft was the culprit, and the story was headlined "Urine bomb hits house". *Derwesten.de*, 29 Jan 2019.

Four months earlier, a large chunk of ice crashed into the mudguard of Harald Braun's BMW in Augsburg, Bavaria. At first, he thought someone had thrown a stone, but reviewing a dashboard camera video, he later thought it must have been an 'ice bomb' from an aeroplane. *Augsburger Allgemeine*, 20 Sept 2018.

### STORMY WEATHER

During storm Gloria in mid-January 2020, the Spanish island of Mallorca lost several beaches. About 50 per cent of the 1.8km-long sandy beach of Cala Millor was washed into the sea, leaving nothing but exposed rocks. The beaches of Manacor, Son Severa, Felatx, Capdepera, Sant Llorenç, Santanyí, and Pollença were also lost to the Mediterranean between 19 and 21 January. Damage caused by heavy rainfall on the island amounted to some 11.2 million Euros. *Rheinpfalz, Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 8 Feb 2020.

The same thing happened in February, when storm front Sabine hit the German North Sea coast, damaging parts of several islands. On Wangeroog, in East Frisia, the bathing beach was "almost completely washed away" as the waves swept 50,000 cubic metres of sand into the ocean. Langeoog and Sylt, Germany's island of the rich, were also heavily affected. *reisereporter.de*, 13 Feb; *welt.de*, 14 Feb 2020.

Then came storm Dennis, which landed a ghost ship on Ireland's coast. On 16 February, the 77m freighter *MV Alta* was thrown against the rocks at Ballycotton, Co. Cork. The ship had been abandoned in September 2018 after the US Coast Guard saved its crew of 10 about 2,200km off Bermuda, and had drifted across the Atlantic to Ireland, where it was discovered by a jogger. The Panama-flagged ship had been on its voyage from Greece to Haiti, and the crewless wreck had been observed several times in the last 18 months. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19 Feb; *ABC, Madrid*, 20 Feb 2020.

### MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Speaking of jetsam, the Gogos family from Bonn, Germany, were surprised when they received a letter from New Zealand in February. Seven years earlier, the family's two children and some friends had written a message in a bottle and thrown it into the Rhine, which flows through the former German capital.





When Christian Gogos read the letter, he learned that the antipodean senders – who identified themselves only as Scott, Julia, Lea, and Alice Joy – had found the bottle in Auckland, 18,000km away. The Gogos children, now 12 and 14, have started a Facebook page to contact the bottle’s finders. If the bottle really floated that far, it must have been carried from Bonn into the North Sea, then across the Atlantic close to the South American coast until the circumpolar currents brought it to Auckland. *Web.de*, 23 Feb 2020.

## PLUMMETING STARLINGS

About 120 starlings fell out of the sky to the ground at Triboltingen, on the Swiss side of Lake Constance, at the end of February. Some birds were still alive, but dying. “A third still moved their wings, the others were already dead,” an eyewitness explained. Several motorists stopped and contacted the police, who called in the Hunting and Forestry Commission of Frauenfeld, who were at a loss to explain the rain of birds. Marie-Pierre Ryser, head of the department for wild animals at Berne University, performed an autopsy and found that “the starlings have haemorrhages in the lungs and have suffered a trauma.” She suggested that the birds had hit an obstacle, such as a lorry, and then continued to fly until they were too weak to continue. *Web.de*, 11 Mar 2020. For more recent starling falls, see **FT388:4, 389:26, 391:19**.

## GOOD AND BAD BVMs

Ever since 2010, the Blessed Virgin Mary has appeared twice a year to Salvatore Caputa, a Sicilian-born ex-policeman living in the village of Bad St Leonhard in the Lavant Valley in Carinthia, Austria (see **FT361:11, 363:21**). The BVM’s first appearance takes place in April each year, while the other falls on the Austrian national holiday of 26 October, when crowds of people visit the village. The



ABOVE: The ‘lion’ of Molina de Segura, which turned out to be a large dog.

Catholic Church has strongly opposed both the apparitions and the pilgrimage from the beginning, and it is said that the number of visitors is now in decline. In October 2019, about 600 people of all ages and from all over the country attended; an interpreter translated what the Virgin had to say, bottles were filled with holy water from the Schlossberg well and printed ‘messages of peace’ from the BVM were distributed. The highlight was the 20th apparition of the Virgin, scheduled for 4pm. She appeared, but was 30 minutes late. *Krone.at*, 26 Oct 2019.

Meanwhile in Vienna, the BVM delivered a less peaceful message. A 33-year-old man, described as quiet and inconspicuous by friends and neighbours, was put on trial after attacking his doctor with a knife. After stabbing the medic (who survived) on 10 July 2019, the man sat down on a bench in the waiting area, repeating the words: “Good, good.” The court heard that ‘J’, a Sierra Leone-born man, was suffering from coronary problems and had suffered a cardiac arrest, after which he received a pacemaker in 2011. On 11 May 2019 he felt a shock in his breast, but his doctor found nothing abnormal. The man, who had never been aggressive, returned to the clinic on 10 July after the BVM had told him: “Son, because he caused you problems he has to

be eliminated.” Following the attack, the man immediately returned to his former peaceful state, apparently unable to remember what had happened. Psychiatrist Sigrid Rossmann found the man suffered from a paranoid disorder and was not responsible for his actions. ‘J’ was detained at a mental hospital. *Wiener Zeitung*, 20 Nov 2019.

## OUT-OF-PLACE ANIMALS

On 10 February, a seal was seen and photographed several times swimming in the Rhine at Krefeld. Police searched the river but found no trace of the animal, which must have returned to its native North Sea. Seal visits to the German Rhine are not uncommon, with cases reported in 2003, 2004, and 2014. *General-Anzeiger, Bonn*, 11 Feb 2020.

After the heavy storms of February, a wallaby went AWOL from its private owner in Talheim, Baden-Württemberg, Germany. It was found the next day, close to where it had escaped, but dead, presumably killed by a fox. *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 11 Feb; *Schwarzwälder Bote*, 12 Feb; *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, 12 Feb 2020.

By fortuitous coincidence, a wallaby was then seen, just four days later, in the Black Forest not far from Horb. Lydia Schonhardt of the Animal Shelter Villingen said two witnesses had approached her to report the sighting of

a “small kangaroo” between Flözlingen and Königsfeld-Weiler. *Schwarzwälder Bote*, 16 Feb 2020.

And, of course, there were panthers. At San Severo, Foggia Province, Apulia, Italy, the owner of a fireworks factory saw a large black cat in front of his premises on 15 January. He first thought it was a dog, but when the animal moved he saw it was a big cat. It jumped onto his car’s bonnet, then disappeared into the fields, where paw prints were later found. Police searched for the cat without success. In the week following the initial report, at least two videos were shot around San Severo showing distant animals that could well have been ordinary house cats. A dead goat was discovered and was believed to have been killed by the cat, which was rumoured to have escaped from its owner, a local mafioso. <https://netzwerk-kryptozoologie.de/panther-sichtungen-in-italien/>, 28 Jan 2020.

In Molina de Segura, Murcia, Spain, inhabitants were frightened by a “strange animal”, possibly a lion, roaming village gardens on 7 March. Police were alerted and quickly arrived – only to find the lion was a large, tame dog, but with a hairdo that gave it a lion’s mane. [twitter.com/MolinaPolicial/status/1236343845455044611](https://twitter.com/MolinaPolicial/status/1236343845455044611).

## PIG MEAT BLUES

A 72-year-old Polish farmer was eaten by his pigs in January. The remains of the man, from a village near Lubin, Silesia, were found by a neighbour who checked in because he hadn’t seen him since the end of 2019. Forensics showed that the farmer had been eaten by his pigs, although the cause of death could not be determined as all soft parts had been destroyed by the animals. It is assumed he died of a cardiac arrest or fainted. The pigs were not fenced in and could range across the whole farm; they will be killed, but their meat will not be sold. *web.de*, 19 Jan 2020.





## NECROLOG

This month, we say goodbye to an archaeologist and author who put megaliths on the map, and an SPR member who wrote an important study of homosexuality



NEIL MORTIMER

### AUBREY BURL

Aubrey Burl's 1976 book *The Stone Circles of the British Isles* was the first book published devoted entirely to the subject of prehistoric megalithic circles. Revised in 2000 as *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany*, it is still the most comprehensive guide to the monuments.

Harry Aubrey Woodruff Burl was born on 24 September 1926. After a period in the Royal Navy (1944-1947), he became interested in the history of pirates, and, inspired by Patrick Pringle's *Jolly Roger: The Story of the Great Age of Piracy* (1953), he began researching original sources about pirates held in the National Maritime Museum, the Public Record Office and the British Museum. It was during this period that his wider interest in history and prehistory led him to stone circles, and he was surprised to find that no books had been published that focused solely on the subject.

From 1952 to 1970 he taught history, archaeology and Latin in a Leicestershire school, and stone circles and megaliths increasingly occupied his mind. His first piece of archaeological

writing was a 1969 co-authored article 'The Great Stone Circle Debate' in *Current Archaeology* magazine. On completing a PhD in 1970, Burl became Principal Lecturer in the Department of Evolution and Prehistory at Hull College of Further Education. In the early 1970s he published a series of academic papers about different aspects of stone circles, including his ground-breaking discovery that the recumbent stone circles of Scotland and Ireland were focused on lunar events.

At the same time, he undertook surveying and joint research with Alexander Thom, Professor of Engineering Science at Oxford University, who had carried out the most detailed plans of stone circles that had ever been made at that point. Thom's complex statistical analysis of the circles, and his controversial concept of the Megalithic Yard, which he saw as a standard unit of construction in prehistory, was considered beyond the pale by the archaeological establishment, who at the time often thought of prehistoric people as little more than savages. Burl, by now a close associate of Thom, concluded

(commonly referred to as ley lines) was developing.

Burl's thorough research based on visits to thousands of prehistoric sites came together with the 1976 publication of *The Stone Circles of the British Isles*. This mighty book was the first time that circles had been catalogued in this way; comparing and contrasting the different types of monuments across the British Isles, examining their possible astronomical properties, and looking at their possible roles in prehistoric life. Hugely influential and commercially successful, the book went on to sell more than 50,000 copies. It necessarily contained a vast amount of research and information, but Burl's accessible and often poetic writing style made it highly readable.

He became involved in another controversy when he took part in a debate between mainstream archaeologists and members of the ley hunting scene, headed by John Michell. Burl was unconvinced by the ley theory, and where Michell saw alignments of transcendental power, Burl saw lines of sometimes

LEFT: Aubrey Burl at Devil's Den, Wiltshire, 2001.

that the Megalithic Yard was "a chimera, a grotesque statistical misconception". However, Thom's work was well received by the burgeoning Earth Mysteries movement, where a counter-cultural mix of prehistory, mysticism, metrology and the re-emergence of interest in leys

connected and sometimes unconnected monuments. Despite their respective approaches to megalithic sites being so different – Michell's being gnostic, and Burl's archaeological – the debate was carried out in a gentlemanly fashion, with each respecting the serious field work that the other had done.

Burl's second major book, *Prehistoric Avebury*, followed in 1979. In 1980 he took early retirement to concentrate on writing and researching full-time. *Rites of The Gods* was published in the same year, an intriguing – and surprisingly overlooked – work of informed speculation on the possible nature of prehistoric religion. Academic papers and popular publications continued, with *Megalithic Brittany: A Guide to Over 350 Ancient Sites and Monuments* appearing in 1985. *The Stonehenge People* (1987) was a reminder that Burl didn't exclusively focus on the monuments, and was always mindful that the sites were built by real people whose roles in megalith building were sometimes left out in the quest for hard facts. Other notable works included the definitive *From Carnac To Callanish: The Prehistoric Stone Rows and Avenues of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (1993) and *Stonehenge: A New History of the World's Greatest Stone Circle* (2006). Burl's concise and brilliant 1995 gazetteer, *A Guide to the Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (updated 2005) has undoubtedly accompanied countless stone hunters' megalithic perambulations.

On the issue of Stonehenge, he again went against mainstream archaeological thought with his view that glaciers, and not people, had brought the bluestones from Wales to the south of England. He felt that his opposition to the prevailing opinion about the





bluestones had wrongly given people the impression that he was a maverick.

His extremely productive retirement continued, with books outside of archaeological matters concerning the Mediæval poet Francois Villon, the Albigensian Crusade and the Roman poet Catullus. In 1997 his research came full circle with the publication of *That Great Pyrate: Bartholomew Roberts and His Crew, 1718-1723*. The book contained more square-riggers than stone circles, but even so he managed to squeeze an ultra-obscure reference to Stonehenge into the appendix.

Always interested in the history of archaeology, he also produced (with myself as co-editor) *Stukeley's Stonehenge: An Unpublished Manuscript 1721-1724*, a transcript of an early version of William Stukeley's notorious *Stonehenge: A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* of 1740, as well as a biography of the 17th century antiquarian John Aubrey.

Burl was a supporter of independent research, and unusual in that he was part of the archaeological establishment (he was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and an Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland), while at the same time encouraging amateur and counter-culture archaeologists, and contributing articles to small press magazines. In the early period of his work, the prevailing attitude was that only professionals had a right to research and theorise about the past. However, Burl wrote: "The gap between the professional and the alternative is only wide at the far ends. In the centre, conclusions are often almost the same." As well as his books, many will remember his talks to regional archaeology societies and Earth Mysteries groups. Despite his quite formal manner, he had a dry sense of humour, was great company, and often enjoyed friendly pints with colleagues and enthusiasts after such events.

Aubrey Burl suffered a fall in February from which he did not recover, and he died in April. He will be remembered for his ground-breaking research into stone circles and other megalithic sites, as well as for the importance he placed on seeing monuments first-hand. His lasting legacy is that he helped inspire a generation of megalith hunters to get out in the field and find out for themselves.

*Aubrey Burl, archaeologist, megalith authority and writer, born London, 24 Sept 1926; died Birmingham, 8 Apr 2020, aged 93.*

**Neil Mortimer**

## DONALD J WEST

Professor Donald West, MD, DLitt, FRCPsych, was an eminent psychiatrist and criminologist whose name will be familiar to students of psychical research. He joined the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) as a teenager in 1941, making numerous contributions to the *SPR Journal*, *Proceedings* and to other parapsychology journals over the years, including reports of mass extra-sensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis experiments, and an investigation into the identity of Jack the Ripper. He also published several books on the paranormal, including *Psychical Research Today* (1953), *Tests for Extrasensory Perception: An Introductory Guide* (1954) and *Eleven Lourdes Miracles: A Critical Analysis of "Miracle Cures" at the Lourdes Shrine, Based on Medical Investigation of Selected Case Histories* (1957). Sceptical about the claims of Spiritualists, he nevertheless believed that telepathy, psychokinesis and other examples of ESP were worthy of scientific study and analysis. He was a full time SPR Research Officer from 1946 to 1949, served on SPR committees and on its Council, becoming President of the organisation in 1963.

West was born in Liverpool in 1924 and grew up in Crosby;

his father was a former labourer who worked as a catering manager for Cunard. His mother was a religious and puritanical woman who died when Donald was 11 years old, his father later marrying his mistress. He was a sickly only child and won a scholarship to the private Merchant Taylors school, going on to read medicine at Liverpool University, where he developed an interest in psychology and parapsychology. He did postgraduate work at London and Cambridge Universities, studying criminology at Cambridge.

Probably his most famous book was *Homosexuality* (1955). Very little had been published for a general readership on the subject, and, at the time, Britain was in the grip of the post-war 'Lavender Scare' witch-hunt against gay men; it was during this period that Lord Montague, Michael Pitt-Rivers and Peter Wildeblood were sentenced to terms of imprisonment in 1954 for 'consensual homosexual offences', a celebrated and notorious case. Accordingly, West decided that the time was right to address the 'problem' of homosexuality in a dispassionate and accessible manner; the book is believed to have played a significant role in altering British public opinion regarding homosexuality, published two years prior to the Wolfenden Committee's Report.

A thorough and objective examination of historical and psychological evidence, including some case studies from 'self-confessed' homosexuals, it concluded with the conventional suggestion that doctors (such as West himself?) should not advise young men to be content with their sexual orientation without giving them a "grave warning" regarding "the frustration and tragedy that so often attend this mode of life".

The book's cautious and apologetic tone, together with West's extreme discretion regarding his own sexuality, infuriated the new generation

of 'gay liberation' activists of the 1970s who frequently heckled his lectures. They failed to comprehend the dangers he had faced in publishing the book at a time when male homosexuality was still illegal and when a man's career could be finished were it to become known he was gay. His intention, as he explained in his memoir *Gay Life, Straight Work* (2012) was to facilitate greater understanding and legal reform, even at the risk to himself: "For a young, unmarried professional to have stuck his neck out so recklessly seems, in retrospect, quite crazy."

Having qualified as a doctor in 1947, he trained to become a psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital, later joining the newly established Institute of Criminology in Cambridge as Assistant Director of Research. Here he pursued his third research interest, the psychological aspects of crime. He had a particular interest in youth crime and initiated a study of youth delinquency and persistent offending. Among his criminological publications are *Murder Followed by Suicide* (1966), *Drug Abuse: The Changing Situation* (1968), *The Young Offender* (1976) and *Delinquency: Its Roots, Careers and Prospects* (1982). He spent the rest of his career at the Institute, becoming a professor of clinical criminology, and was its Director from 1981 to his retirement in 1984, when he was named Emeritus Professor of Clinical Criminology. West was appointed to the Parole Board at its foundation in 1968, serving as a mental health commissioner between 1992 and 1997.

He was in a relationship with art historian Pietro Raffo for over 45 years until the latter's death in 2000. In 2006, he entered into a civil partnership with Vincenzo, who survives him.

*Professor Donald James West, psychiatrist, criminologist and paranormal researcher, born Liverpool, 9 June 1924; died 31 Jan 2020, aged 95.*





## Poking about in the past

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research

### GREER'S NEW GADGET

There's now one more thing to add to the thousands you can do with your smartphone.

Stephen Greer, whom you will recall is a keenie for Disclosure, has released an app that will guide you, or teach you, how to hunt for UFOs, maybe even call them to you. Dr Greer became mildly notorious a while back for charging people a few hundred dollars a time to go with him out into the countryside, where he would wave a lighted torch at the sky, and claim to have attracted a UFO or two. Not having come across an account by any of those hiking hopefuls as to how well they thought their exercises had concluded, I can't say what the general reaction was from participants. (But I am reminded of the running commentaries the late Arthur Shuttleworth would give on the hills outside Warminster, assuring the faithful how all manner of mundane lights in the sky were flying saucers.) Known as the CE5 Contact App, it can be had from Google Play and the Apple App Store. Naturally, one wonders how close an encounter with one's wallet Dr Greer requires for the pleasure of letting you play with it.

### UP THERE WITH ADAMSKI

I fear I may have been egregiously remiss in not previously commending Curt Collins's excellent blog 'The Saucers That Time Forgot', often produced in collaboration with Claude Falkstrom. Their latest offering is what they accurately announce as "an epic examination of one of the UK's most famous close encounters from the 1950s" featuring one Jessie Roestenburg. Who I also confess was a stranger to me till now. However, if you enjoy the sensation of your eyes starting from your head, their previous post is definitely for you too. It is, in their words, "the unbelievable ballad of Harold Jesse Berney".

As con-men go, Berney deserves to be up there with George Adamski, Silas Newton and a few others as one of ufology's greats. And his special distinction is that he was the first person to go to jail for a crime involving flying saucers [see **FT222:40-41**]. The piece kicks off in grand fashion: "In early 1957, a

Washington, DC, legal secretary disclosed secrets to police about the US government's technological exchange program with

extraterrestrials. Something had gone wrong and the project's top man had vanished. As a result, the FBI launched an investigation for Harold J Berney. His last known location: The planet Venus." It turned out that Berney had been running scams of one kind or another for four decades, though none quite as audacious as his last.

Born in 1898, Berney was by trade a sign painter, though he claimed to be other things and sailed under a variety of other names (one of which was HJ Delong, for synchronicity aficionados). He also had a habit of collecting and abandoning women, some of whom he married. His first arrest was in 1918, accused of white slavery (he'd taken up with the 15-year-old little sister of his wife, and taken her across state lines) and draft dodging. And off he went to jail in Georgia.

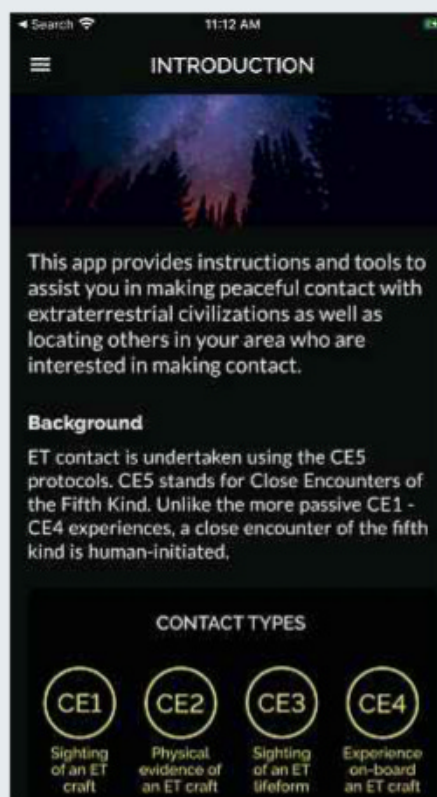
He ended being hunted and caught by the FBI because he had claimed to have invented a top-secret 'free energy modulator' (aka the Magnetic Flux Modulator) with the aid of the Venusians. Pauline Goebel invested \$40,000 in the project; a Florida couple seem to have parted with another \$20,000. He would disappear from time to time, telling

Pauline he was visiting collaborators on Venus. (The old alien-technology-swap legend is older than you – or I – had thought.) He had decided to leg it with his ill-gotten gains when Pauline, who'd believed it all, alerted the FBI. This is extremely truncated version of an extraordinary and complex story. One can but admire the thoroughness and tenacity of the research involved. To start where we began, do read the whole bizarre tale at: [thesaucersthattimeforgot.blogspot.com/](http://thesaucersthattimeforgot.blogspot.com/), and do keep an eye on the site for more revelations from the past.

### BREWER'S BREWS

Jack Brewer, author of *The Greys Have Been Framed*, and whom I have had the good grace to mention before, has put up a couple of fascinating posts on his UFO Trail blog. The first is a reproduction of Chapter 13 of his book, which reminds us all of the shambles that MUFON has become – and how long ago it all started. One of the hearts of this story is the scandalous manner in which John Carpenter, in the 1990s, sold confidential documentation of his abduction research (which included hypnosis sessions) to that *éminence grise* Robert Bigelow at \$100 a pop, thus netting Carpenter \$14,000. MUFON, under whose auspices he worked, did precisely nothing about this transgression, although the Missouri Division of Professional Registration took a different view and put Carpenter on probation as a social worker for five years. It is a grotesque story, and we should be grateful for being reminded of it. MUFON were also the guys who brought *Hangar One* to cable TV, to near-universal derision from those in the know. What a fall from grace.

Brewer's latest, as I write (2 May 2020), is titled 'Normalizing the Fantastic and Resisting the Rational', which serves for me as an excellent companion piece to my previous musings on why true believers believe, however their beliefs are countered. "The UFO genre has a long and troubled history of treating extreme claims as the norm," he writes, and, having observed this field for longer than has always been good for me, I might add that as time goes by what might have been seen as bats in 1989 has been assimilated as standard fare years later. Which is a bit unnerving. I noticed recently someone on the intertubes citing the unhinged Col Corso (*The Day After Roswell*) as a reliable source. I almost said *How dare you?* But anyway, do read this piece: it's intelligent and articulate, as Brewer always is, and good food for thought.



### Man Who 'Visited' Venus Held In \$40,000 Fraud Against Woman

WASHINGTON, March 26 (AP)—Blue sky promotions have rocketed into outer space, the Federal Bureau of Investigation indicated today, in charging Harold Jesse Berney, a former convict, with defrauding investors with a story that went way out of this world—to Venus, in fact.

Or rather to Venus, in fiction, say FBI men who do not take as much stock as Miss Pauline E. Gobel did in a promotion which they say was represented as the commercial result of two flying saucer trips to the planet.

The FBI accuses Berney, a Washington sign painter, of swindling Miss Gobel, a secretary, of \$40,000. A complaint filed March 8 charges Berney with obtaining money and property from Miss Gobel by fraud, and also with causing to be transported in interstate commerce securities valued at \$10,000 although knowing they had been obtained through fraud. According to the FBI, Ber-



Associated Press Wirephoto  
HAROLD J. BERNEY

Venus where he studied the planet's science and culture. To support his story, the FBI said, Berney had written a book describing his "adventures" in outer space, which, investors were told, had inspired him to





# Alien exodus?

JENNY RANGLES wonders whether changes in ufology have seen the end of the close encounter

During these weeks of lockdown I've had time to think about the aliens we see – or rather, these days, maybe don't see so much.

Where have they gone? What are alien contacts like in the 21st century? Does anyone still have old school close encounters of the third kind? They seem to be an endangered species. I looked at the world's largest UFO group – MUFON in the USA – to see if they had been recording alien activity in recent years. There were plenty of oddly shaped craft and mysterious lights, but the only new alien contacts I could find were those recorded recently, but which actually occurred decades ago.

Typical was a case from 7 October 1972, reported in January 2020 by a man in his 60s; he'd only been 10 when the events happened. He and his older brother had been playing outside in Greenville, Mississippi, when they both sensed a static disturbance that created a tingling sensation and emanated from a huge 'craft' above. The witness went on to have contactee-type experiences. Another recently recorded case dates from 1994, when the witness, then nine, was in Clinton, Tennessee. He had gone to collect toys from his bedroom when he saw two 'aliens' looking in through a window, illuminated by a street lamp: classic UFO types – a smaller 'gray' and a taller 'Zeta' who were studying him curiously and intently. The only recent case in the MUFON summaries was from Pahrump, Nevada, where at 4.10am on 27 August 2018 a witness saw a 'Mothman' landing on the road as he drove towards it. Standing 7ft (2m) tall, it wrapped its wings round its grey face as if bracing for impact, but the driver steered around it in time. So: no real examples of the classic CE3 or CE4 cases of the kind we used to get.

I asked Heather Dixon (pictured above), for many years a key figure investigating cases for Britain's longest running active UFO group, where I was a coordinator up to 1995, for her thoughts. She told me that reported alien activity is not entirely absent and, while the British UFO Research Association now has a primarily online presence, cases are still pursued by its director, for whom I have the utmost respect. "BUFORA has seen an increase in high strangeness reports over the last few years," she writes in a fascinating summary accessible on BUFORA's website. "[It is] puzzling in some cases as to why reports that *do not include* sightings of



perceived strange objects and lights in the sky are reported to a UFO organisation at all." Indeed, you might ask that question of MUFON concerning the 2018 Nevada case, in which no UFO was involved, just a bizarre 'creature'.

Heather astutely notes that we need to understand the answer if we are to appreciate why some people just see lights while others perceive what they witness as something "more exotic and complex". This focus on the percipient and not just what they perceive is for me a key development within modern ufology, as all events are an interaction between stimulus and witness: you cannot fully understand what has happened without taking both into account.

Heather asks: "Is it possible there is an objective truth in these narratives or is modern day interpretation, belief and memory the key to finding explanations for these high strangeness reports?"

She rightly points out that ufology has changed since the 1990s, being now far less visible, less mediated through popular writers, famous witnesses, dramatic TV shows or huge conferences. Has being Internet-based, as it is today, changed its social character? And is this impacting on our perception of what a witness sees in ways we must seek to understand?

There is now less exposure to the UFO community's beliefs and ideologies, as once paraded by a sensation-hungry media. Perhaps this feeds back into how witnesses perceive their experiences, giving them greater freedom of self-expression and less of a steer from ufological orthodoxy. As Heather notes, while it is easier than ever for witnesses to access UFO speculation online, paradoxically, their sightings are no longer guided by organisations which might seek to moderate their public expression in a quest for credibility. This was certainly

a factor in my years helping to maintain BUFORA's public profile.

Heather adds: "Over many years, I have never found any definitive proof that people are having experiences with an extraterrestrial presence... [just] anecdotal narratives about extraordinary human experiences and how these are interpreted; so they remain just that – remarkable tales from people who have experienced mysterious incidents. Those who feel they have undergone puzzling experiences look for answers... depend upon their beliefs as to how they interpret them... [and will] contact people and organisations that reflect and reinforce these beliefs, unwittingly at times."

Heather cites a recent BUFORA 'contact' case involving a woman who had woken in bed to find a mist in her room and saw a small figure nearby. After she looked away briefly, it was gone. But in the morning, she found two large bruises on her legs – perhaps self-inflicted. Sensibly, as any good investigator should, Heather respected the witness, listened to her story, but did not assume it meant she was a contactee. Indeed, she asked questions aimed at eliminating the more likely premise – that this was an example of the long-recognised 'sleep paralysis'. In my view, she did the right thing in explaining this to the witness, but the woman's reaction was interesting. She had felt no paralysis, so rejected that theory and looked up alien imagery online to find a match for the figure she had seen. Researchers often see how personal interpretation runs a risk of altering witness memory to fit an event with a preferred solution. Heather handled this sensitively and advised the woman of the risks of seeking affirmation and the dubious status of much material online. This seemed to help; the witness was reassured and said she was now struggling less to sleep than in the immediate wake of her 'alien contact'.

I am delighted that BUFORA, under Heather's guidance, is following a path the group long held to in trying to resolve a case, while accepting that sometimes we might fail. As a first step, we should try to find an explanation that makes sense and puts a witness at ease. The continued impact on the life of an experiencer should not be sidelined or used as an opportunity to chase 'contact' with 'aliens', but be put in the context of improving the mental welfare of the percipient. An investigator's first duty is to do no harm.



# BEAKY BLINDERS

## IN SEARCH OF THE PLAGUE DOCTOR

The ominous figure of the plague doctor, with his long robes and bird-like mask, seems an appropriate icon for our pandemic-hit times. But can this harbinger of death, currently enjoying a pop cultural revival, be traced back to an historical reality? **JONATHAN FERGUSON** reviews the documents, images and artefacts that trace the macabre medic's evolution.

**T**he current SARS-CoV-2 viral pandemic has inevitably seen comparisons drawn with the bubonic and pneumonic plagues of mediæval and Enlightenment Europe. Just as inevitably, the iconic masked plague doctor has seen something of a resurgence.<sup>1</sup>

The craft website etsy.com is full of plague doctor-related items, numerous articles on the subject have appeared, and during the outbreak individuals have even been seen in public wearing the mask (see p4). Of course, the plague doctor never really went away, and had already diversified from cheap Hallowe'en masks to elaborately crafted pieces, some exaggeratedly birdlike, some in steampunk style, and even some historically accurate recreations.<sup>2</sup> Even in the midst of COVID-19 chaos, the plague doctor persona continues to offer gallows humour, escapism, and for some, perhaps a way to 'process' the consequences of the outbreak. These 'fun' aspects are tempered by the seriousness of the situation, and mirrored by the ongoing debate over the increasing public use of masks and their efficacy.<sup>3</sup> Although certainly more effective against viral infection, the head-to-toe protective gear now routinely worn by medical professionals – including facemasks and face shields – nonetheless ominously echoes the equipment of the plague doctor.

### ENTER DR BEAK

Although modern renditions vary, there are constants that can be traced back to an historical reality. These comprise enveloping robes, or perhaps a long coat, a wide-brimmed hat, a rod or staff and, most notably, a mask with long, curved beak mimicking that of a bird. Some feature nostril openings and delineated upper and lower mandibles. Perhaps the earliest depiction is a tiny pair of figures found in the 1651 frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, although this identification has not met with universal acceptance.<sup>4</sup> Given the discrepancy in scale by comparison with human figures elsewhere in the engraving, the two beaked figures may in fact represent ravens, serving a similar intended role as ominous harbingers.



### *The very first illustration of a plague doctor appeared in 1656*

Another questionable early association pertains to an outbreak of disease in Paris in 1619. This link originates with the identification by Michel, Abbot of Saint-Martin, of French royal physician Charles Delorme as the costume's inventor. It is important to note that the oft-quoted full description of this (which can be found in relevant Wikipedia articles) is in fact not a true reflection of any one primary source. In fact, it is a composite of two sources, combined by Victorian author NM Bernardin into a long and fanciful dialogue between Michel and Delorme.<sup>5</sup> The first source is

LEFT: A detail from the frontispiece of *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (1651) showing alleged plague doctors. FACING PAGE: The earliest extant plague doctor depiction, by Sebastiano Zecchini, 1656.

Michel's 'Moyens faciles et éprouvés dont M. de l'Orme, médecin, s'est servi pour vivre près de cent ans' (1682):

"He was never without his own design of (goatskin) leather coat, and dressed from head to toe with pantaloons and a mask of the same leather to which he attached a long nose half a foot in length in order to keep out the bad air."<sup>6</sup>

Other details apparently derive from 'Remarques critiques sur le dictionnaire de Bayle' (1748): "He had himself made, he says, a leather suit, which bad air penetrates with great difficulty: he put garlic and rue [a type of plant] in his mouth; he put incense in his nose and ears, covered his eyes with spectacles, and in this equipment assisted the sick, and he healed almost as much as he gave remedies."<sup>7</sup>

There is no specific mention of a birdlike beak, gloves, stick or hat, although the avian resemblance is implied and the latter items were all in use by gentlemen of the era. Michel goes on to say that Delorme gave another coat and mask to the daughter of Monsieur Renaud, chief surgeon to King Louis XIII. At least one physician, therefore, was wearing something close to the archetypal plague costume in the early decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first illustration of a plague doctor did not appear until 1656. Printed in Rome and Perugia, it is attributed to the engraver Sebastiano Zecchini: "The outfit in which the doctors in Rome go to medicate in defence of the infectious disease is of waxed canvas, the face with eyeglasses, & the nose full of perfumes against the infection. They hold a staff because of their reduced vision and to demonstrate their operations."

Interestingly, the Italians were using waxed canvas instead of the thin goat leather advocated by Delorme, but the logic was the same: slick fabrics were thought to prevent contagion from adhering.<sup>8</sup> This famous





**L'**HABITO con il quale vanno i Medici per Roma à medicare per difesa del mal Contagioso è di tela incerata, il Volto ordinario, con gli Occhiali di Christallo, & il Naso pieno di Profumi contro l'infettione. Portano vna Verga in mano per dare à vedere, e dimostrare le loro operationi. In Roma, & in Perugia, Per Sebastiano Zecchini. 1656.





ABOVE LEFT: One of two German derivatives of the Italian original, this one by Gerhart Altzenbach and entitled ‘Kleidung wider den Todt’ or ‘Death’s Clothing’. ABOVE RIGHT: Paul Fürst’s ‘Der Doctor Schnabel von Rom’ or ‘Dr Beak of Rome’. BELOW: Manget’s 1721 version of the plague doctor.

depiction was copied and derived many times in the following years, notably by German engravers Gerhart Altzenbach and Paulus Fürst. Both carry the same date as the Italian version but are overtly satirical, mockingly dubbing the figure ‘Doctor Beak’. Clearly, this form of plague costume was not known in Germany. It was also commented upon as ‘unique’ by Thomas Bartholin (1616–1680) of the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup> Fürst’s features an additional *memento mori* in the form of a winged hourglass on the tip of the doctor’s staff and obviously claw-like fingers, heightening the association with death. It also references a different original artist by the name of ‘I Columbina’, hinting at yet another Italian version pre-dating all the known examples and now lost. Altzenbach’s edition is an outright satirical ‘broadside’, actually named ‘Death’s Clothing’, complete with copious additional commentary that compares the birdlike plague doctor with a scavenging raven:

*Cadavera sucht er zu fristen  
Gleich wie der Corvus auf der Misten*

Or:  
“He seeks cadavers to eke out a living  
Just like the raven on the dung heap”



Nearly a half century later, a new artwork was produced for Swiss doctor Theodor Zwinger III (1658-1724). Two copies exist, showing the same black-robed figure with a naturalistic, raven-like beak. The likely original, oil paint on copper, was gifted to the Historisches Museum Basel in Switzerland in 1908 and is dated circa 1700. A cruder and possibly later copy (oil on wood) resides in the UK’s Wellcome Collection. Of course, Zwinger’s choice of clothing in this artwork does not necessarily mean that he ever wore it. As a coat of arms, it is probably symbolic, possibly even representing him as the modern enlightened physician on the right and as the outmoded plague doctor on the left. Nevertheless, the bird-faced plague doctor was clearly a well-known figure by this time.

A generation later, we find an updated depiction in the frontispiece to (Genovese) Jean-Jacques Manget’s ‘Traité de la peste’.<sup>10</sup> Produced by an unidentified artist, this is clearly based upon the earlier Italian and German pieces in terms of pose, but replaces the slim bird mask with a bulbous-looking over-the-head hood, gauntlet-style gloves and a modernised style of hat.

The accompanying description is more detailed than earlier ones and is the first to





HISTORISCHES MUSEUM BASEL, PHOTO: A NIEMZ

ABOVE: The Historisches Museum Basel's copy of the arms of Swiss doctor Theodore Zwinger III. To the left stands the figure of a raven-beaked plague doctor.

comment on the resemblance of the long nose to a bird's beak:

*Le nez en forme de bec est rempli de parfums et oint intérieurement de matières balsamiques ... sous le manteau, on porte ordinairement des bottines, des culottes de peau attachées audites bottines et une chemise de peau unie dont on referme le bas dans les culottes, le chapeau et les gants sont aussi de même peau de maroquin du levant.*

"The beak-shaped nose is filled with perfumes and anointed internally with balsamic materials... under the coat, one usually wears ankle boots, skin breeches attached to said ankle boots and a plain skin shirt whose bottom is closed in the breeches, the hat and the gloves are also of the same goatskin leather."

The sources of this period make clear that the plague doctor's costume had not been seen (in France at least) for some time. It was brought back into use by another royal physician, François Chicoyneau, to help combat the 1720 outbreak of bubonic plague in Marseilles.<sup>11</sup> By this time opinions on the cause of plague varied, with some recommending a *cordon sanitaire* to contain the disease.<sup>12</sup> Chicoyneau championed the plague doctor costume because he remained convinced by the miasma theory, in which

## The masks' beak used sweet-smelling plants contained within

disease was caused by 'bad air' (For more on miasma theory, see FT350:30-37). The mask's beak, as it had a century before, would combat this by using sweet-smelling plants contained within.

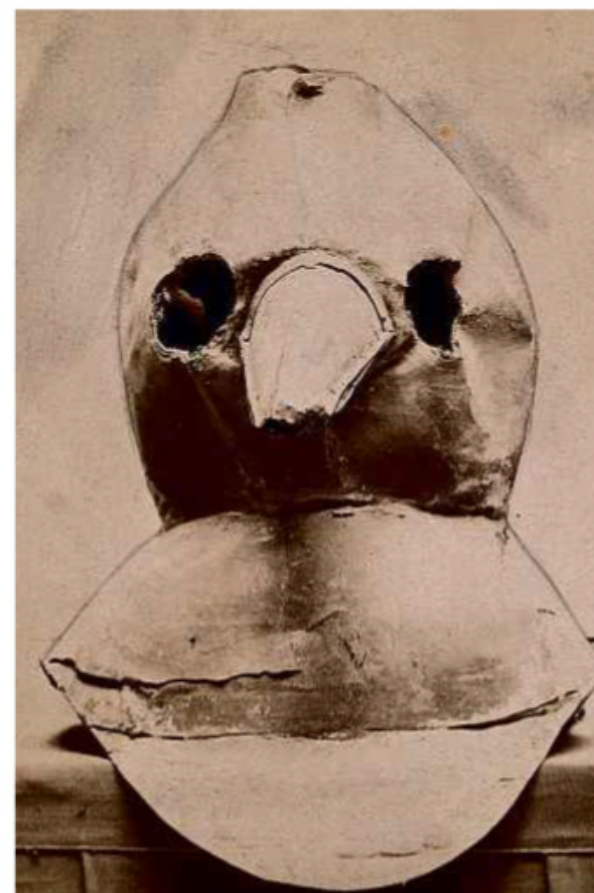
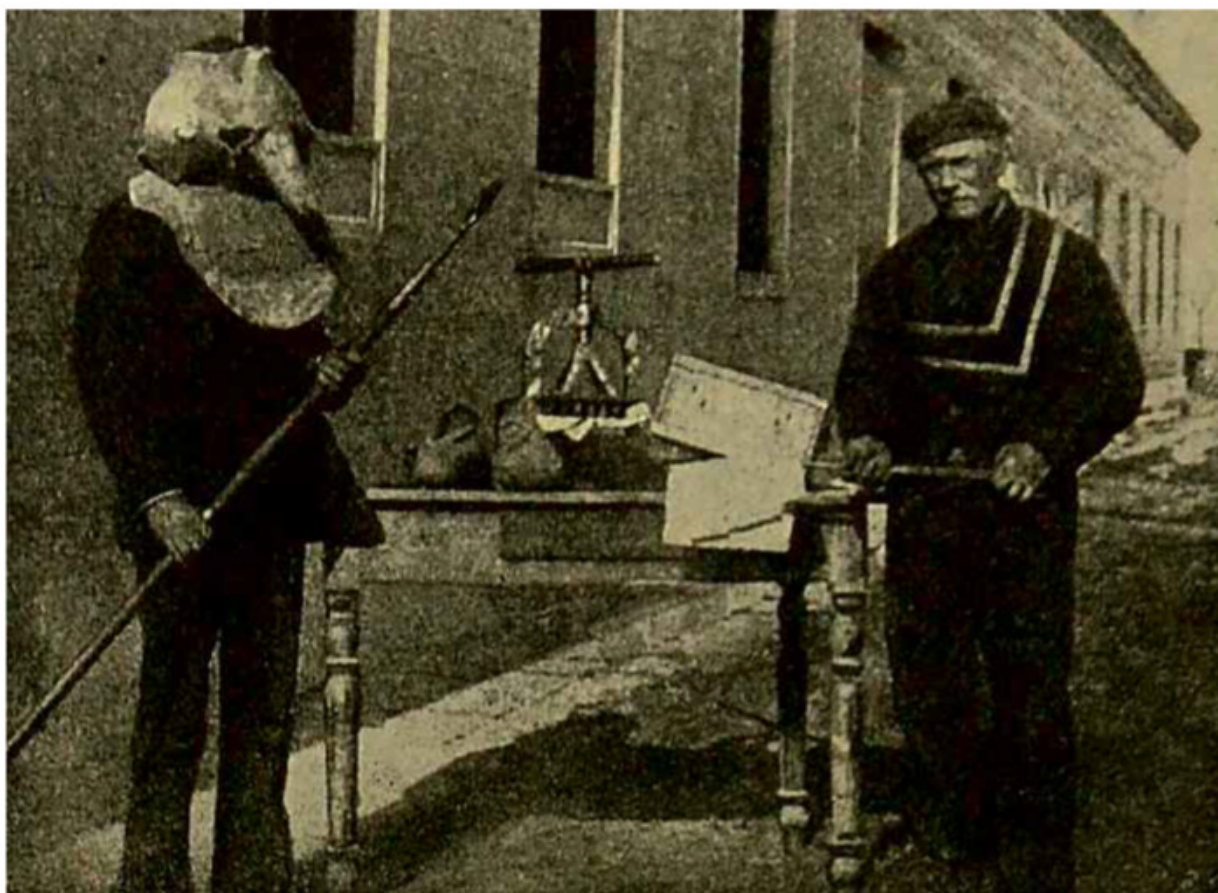
### SURVIVING MASKS

Students of the plague doctor are not restricted to texts and illustrations. Between five and seven 'beaked' plague masks have been documented. Up to four of them (including two possible later recreations) seem to have been lost or destroyed. One of these was originally collected for the Museum of Hygiene in Rome from the *lazaretto* or plague hospital in Venice.<sup>13</sup> It now exists only in a photograph taken at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which shows

it already in a deteriorated state. A very similar style of mask, in a similar condition, was photographed in 1889 on the island of Poveglia (also in the province of Venice). A *lazaretto* was not established there until 1808, suggesting that these masks are in fact early 19<sup>th</sup> century descendants of the 17<sup>th</sup> century originals.<sup>14</sup> If the style of mask evolved, the underlying belief did not: the miasma theory of disease was not abandoned until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Wellcome Trust possessed two complete outfits, apparently reproduction pieces, used for teaching in its Historical Medical Museum. On display where they could be touched by visitors, these deteriorated and are no longer extant, but appear in the Trust's collection of photographs. The three extant and potentially authentic masks were collected by German museums: the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, the Deutsches Medizinhistorisches Museum in Ingolstadt, and the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museum in Mannheim.<sup>15</sup> All are close in design. The DMM and Reiss-Engelhorn examples are made of waxed canvas (the latter with a distinctive flat faceplate), and the DHM hood of velvet with a waxed linen lining. Date and provenance are uncertain.





WELLCOME COLLECTION

**ABOVE LEFT:** The Poveglia mask, illustrated in a German medical book. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The Wellcome Institute's photograph of the Italian mask. **BELOW:** The two complete outfits, apparently reproduction pieces, used for teaching and formerly on display in the Wellcome Trust's Historical Medical Museum.

Indeed, scholars based at the DHM and DMM have recently challenged the authenticity of their own exhibits, the former purchased at auction in 2006 in Vienna and the latter from a Stuttgart-based dealer in 2002.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the DHM mask, the DMM example lacks external nostrils, preventing airflow over the fragrant beak contents. The use of velvet on the former mask is at odds with period ideas on contagion, as porous fabric would retain the decaying particles borne by miasma. It is possible, however, that the mask has been incorrectly restored at some time, the beak removed and reattached with the mask turned inside out. The museums also query the widely spaced lenses on both masks as impractical. Given that the beak in any case obstructs forward vision, it is possible that this is a deliberate design choice, allowing the wearer to peer with one eye or the other at close quarters. If genuine, they likely date to the 18th rather than the 17th century.

These masks seem to represent a further evolution from the Manget type, being bulkier, bulbous full-hood designs with integrated eye lenses instead of separate spectacles. They lack the birdlike details of a downward-curved 'beak', delineated upper and lower mandibles, or nostrils. The snouts are typically made of the same fabric (leather or waxed cloth) as the mask, but the Reiss-Engelhorn example has a rigid sheet copper nose, as does the Italian mask photographed by the Wellcome. Although these masks are certainly much bulkier than their forebears, it should be noted that even the early artwork *may* in fact depict hoods rather than facemasks. Close examination of the earliest 1656 engraving reveals that the hooded portion of the robe overlies the



GENERAL PHOTOGRAPHIC AGENCY / GETTY IMAGES



mask itself. This makes it impossible to tell whether the mask covered only the face or the entire head (although the very fact that the robe envelopes the mask suggests otherwise). In any case, this contrasts with modern depictions which overwhelmingly show a mask covering the face only and tied or strapped behind the head, often overlying a separate hood.

### THE PLAGUE DOCTOR TODAY

The popular culture ‘afterlife’ of the plague doctor is not the main focus of this article, but should not be ignored. Whereas period depictions and descriptions are rare, suggesting that few doctors actually chose to wear the iconic outfit, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century impressions are common. Perhaps most important, due to its implied historicity, is the use of the plague doctor character *il Medico della Peste* in Venetian *commedia dell’arte* and carnival masks. This is without doubt a modern phenomenon, as recent as the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Today’s papier-mâché Venetian mask probably derives from the vaguely similar long-nosed masks worn by the *Capitano* and *Zanni* characters of the *Commedia*, which were devised with phallic and not prophylactic intent.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, this style of hard-shelled, lens-free form has now fed back into pop culture, appearing prominently in the pandemic-themed sci-fi TV programme *12 Monkeys*. Indeed, the mask has diversified into a wide variety of forms, but with its practical application long since passed, the birdlike original design is again the most



DEUTSCHES MEDIZINHISTORISCHES MUSEUM INGOLSTADT



DPA / PA IMAGES

**TOP:** The plague mask in the Deutsches Medizinhistorisches Museum, Ingolstadt. Like the DHM mask seen overleaf, the eye lenses are placed very far apart.  
**ABOVE:** Conservator Bernd Hoffmann-Schimpf with the Reiss-Engelhorn Museum’s plague mask, as displayed in the exhibition ‘Fundsache Luther’ in 2009.



popular. Of course, in the period of its actual use the appearance of the mask was secondary to its intended function. The main goal then, as now, was to protect the wearer from unseen agents of contagion. The masks (especially the later, less-stylised over-the-head forms) are not so different in concept or execution from the early ‘gas hoods’ of the First World War, which also lacked an effective filter and simply acted as a barrier to toxic chemicals. Miasma theory was bogus, but such a mask would offer some limited protection from liquid droplets containing viruses or bacteria.

It is important to note that all of the evidence presented here, while it points to the beaked plague mask being a real, historical thing, suggests that it was the exception, not the rule. All we can say for sure is that it was probably in only limited use in France and Italy from around 1620 to 1820. Marion Maria Ruisinger of the DMM also points to alternative masks in the form of simple pointed hoods with eyeholes that seem to have been at least as common as the beaked masks. The legacy of the beak mask is far more significant than its use would indicate, without doubt because of its distinctive, animalistic appearance.

If the original intent of the birdlike features was to put patients somehow at ease then it clearly backfired. As the German ‘Doctor Schnabel’ engravings show, it led critics to compare physicians to that infamous bird of death, the raven – complete, in the Fürst version, with several terrified prospective patients running away from the doctor, who openly wields a memento mori.



**LEFT:** The Deutsches Historisches Museum mask has external nostrils, allowing air to flow over the scented material that would have been placed inside the nose.

equipment. Fully enveloping clothing made in overlapping pieces of leather or waxed cloth and covering the eyes, nose and mouth, would help prevent the ingress of droplets containing viruses or bacteria. Using a rod or staff is simply a form of ‘social distancing’. PPE for medical professionals had a long way to go to become truly effective, and in the process would become less alarming to look at. Although the modern HAZMAT suit has arguably become the mantle of the impassive, unfeeling, anonymous medical worker, it is unlikely ever to replace the ‘beaked’ plague doctor – who will forever remain a personification of our vulnerability to infection, disease, and death – in the European cultural memory.

Even Theodor Zwinger’s coat of arms seems to literally paint his plague doctor self as an ominous harbinger of disease and death.

This negative view of the plague doctor as symbol of an elitist, distant, uncaring medical profession persists to this day. Subsequent advances in medical science have only underscored this. Hindsight is of course 20/20, and perhaps modern observers should recognise that Enlightenment-era physicians were trying to help the infected, not terrify them or remind them of their mortality. Their methods may have been questionable, but they were thinking along the right lines in terms of personal protective

*With thanks to Marion Maria Ruisinger of the DMM, Sabine Witt of the DHM and my colleague Bob Woosnam-Savage for their kind assistance.*

♦ **JONATHAN FERGUSON** is Keeper of Firearms & Artillery at the Royal Armouries Museum. He has a strong interest in forteana, and has previously written on vampire killing kits for *FT*. The kit that he acquired for the Royal Armouries was displayed as part of the British Library’s 2014-15 exhibition ‘Terror and Wonder: the Gothic Imagination’. He also maintains the ‘BS Historian’ blog (bshistorian.wordpress.com) covering paranormal and contested history from a sceptical perspective.

## NOTES

**1** One individual even appeared in the background of a national news report. See [mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/coronavirus-man-dressed-plague-doctor-21728571](http://mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/coronavirus-man-dressed-plague-doctor-21728571)

**2** See <http://www.ministryofmasks.com/shop/plague-doctor-masks/dr-pestilence-plague-doctor-mask/>

**3** Advice from different countries and organisations varies, although most agree that these do little to protect the wearer (as opposed to respirator masks) but could help limit the spread of the disease.

**4** Quentin Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics*, 2018, p285;

Francesca Falk, ‘Hobbes’ Leviathan und die aus dem Blick gefallenen Schnabelmasken’, *Leviathan* Vol. 39 Issue 2, June 2011, pp247-266.

**5** The two men were indeed contemporaries but were not recorded in conversation. See NM Bernardin, ‘Un Grand Médecin du XVIIe siècle’, *La revue de Paris*, 1896, pp191-218. Unfortunately, his account was taken at face value and the error perpetuated. See for example Monique Lucenet, *Les grandes pestes en France*, Aubier, 1985, p174.

**6** Pp424-425.

**7** Although writing after the fact, Bayle credits his information to Michel and may

have had sight of a more nearly contemporary source, possibly Michel’s ‘Portrait et éloge de Ch. de Lorme, médecin,’ also published in 1682.

**8** Marion Maria Ruisinger. 2019. ‘Fact or Fiction? Ein kritischer Blick auf den “Schnabeldoktor”’, in: LWL-Museum für Archäologie (red.), *Pest. Eine Spurensuche*, 2019, pp267-274.

**9** ‘Wahrheit oder Mythos? Der Pestdoktor und die Schnabelmaske’, 2019. [www.lwl.org/pressemitteilungen/nr\\_mitteilung.php?urlID=48805](http://www.lwl.org/pressemitteilungen/nr_mitteilung.php?urlID=48805)

**10** Jean-Jacques Manget: *Traité De La Peste: Recueilli Des Meilleurs Auteurs Anciens Et*

*Modernes, Et Enrichi De Remarques Et Observations Théoriques Et Pratiques*, 1721.

**11** One standalone engraving variant on the Manget illustration specifically references Chicoyneau. See [www.artpopulaire.fr/habit-de-medecin-de-la- peste-1721/](http://www.artpopulaire.fr/habit-de-medecin-de-la- peste-1721/); Junko Thérèse Takeda, *Between Crown and Commerce: Marseille and the Early Modern Mediterranean*, 2011, p114.

**12** Edward Worth Library: *Case Study: Plague at Marseilles 1720*, 2020. <https://infectiousdiseases.edwardworthlibrary.ie/plague/marseilles-case-study/>

**13** Wellcome Institute: *The pest anatomized: five centuries of plague in Western*

*Europe*, 1985, p13. [archive.org/details/b20457790](http://archive.org/details/b20457790)

**14** Jane L Stevens Crawshaw: *Plague Hospitals: Public Health for the City in Early Modern Venice*, 2016, p241.

**15** Christine Maisch-Straub: ‘Pestmaske als beklemmender Zeitzeuge’, *Mannheimer Morgen*, 2009. <https://www.morgenweb.de/artikel-mannheim-pestmaske-als-beklemmender-zeitzeuge-arid,147385.html>. LWL: ‘Wahrheit oder Mythos? Der Pestdoktor und die Schnabelmaske’, 2019. [https://www.lwl.org/pressemitteilungen/nr\\_mitteilung.php?urlID=48805](https://www.lwl.org/pressemitteilungen/nr_mitteilung.php?urlID=48805)

**16** The British Museum, *Germany: Memories of a Nation*, exhibition catalogue, 2014, p16. [enfilade18thc.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/germany-protection-from-seizure-final.pdf](http://enfilade18thc.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/germany-protection-from-seizure-final.pdf)

**17** Laura Morelli, *Venetian Carnival Masks: The Plague Doctor*. lauramorelli.com/venetian-carnival-masks-the-plague-doctor/. The *Commedia* did feature a doctor character, but he did not wear a mask and had no connection to plague

**18** See for example Paul C Castagno, *The Early Commedia Dell’arte (1550-1621): The Mannerist Context*, 1994, p102.

**19** Ruisinger, op. cit.



# EMERGENCY CORONAVIRUS APPEAL

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# THE PARALLAX VIEW

## THE RETURN OF THE FLAT EARTH THEORY

A lot of people are opposed to globalisation these days, but we're not sure they'd go so far as to insist that our planet is actually pancake-shaped. **GORDON RUTTER** wonders why the Flat Earth theory has been making a comeback – and meets one of its modern proponents.

**T**he Flat Earth theory – or conspiracy, depending upon your own view – has had a surprising resurgence in recent years (see **FT281:16**, **338:20-21**, **368:12**, **372:25**). Celebrities have espoused Flat Earthism, new books about it have been published, graffiti has sprung up along the sides of roads; there are meetings, societies, web pages and even a Flat Earth shop in Inverness. But what is it, why has it come back – and could it be true?

### THEY ALL LAUGHED...

Mention the Flat Earth to most people and they'll probably think of Columbus setting out to show the rest of the world that the Earth was *not* flat, sailing west from Spain to get to India, and that sort of thing. In fact, in the 15th century of Columbus, most people who had an opinion on the subject were perfectly happy to think that the world was spherical and at the centre of the Universe. The idea that Columbus was a beacon of knowledge shining out against ignorance stems from Washington Irving's (he of "Sleepy Hollow" fame) 1828 biography of him.

It would appear that during the time of Columbus, the only real dispute was about the size of the planet and the relative position of the east coast of Asia. Columbus thought that Japan, for example, was a mere 5,000km (3,100 miles) to the east of Spain, as opposed to the actual 20,000km (12,400 miles). His contemporaries did not know the exact figure – they just thought it was further away and that the ships of the time could not carry sufficient provisions for the voyage. They were right. Columbus's crew were ready to mutiny, not for fear of sailing off the end of the world, but for fear of starving to death. Just in time, the ships reached the Caribbean, where they were able to take on fresh food and water. To find an almost universal belief in a Flat Earth, we have to go further back in time.

In ancient times, anyone who thought



**LEFT:** The distinctively flat landscape of the Cambridgeshire Fens. Here, Rowbotham developed his theories and Alfred Wallace Russell and John Hampden conducted their Bedford Level Experiment of 1870.

all. Aristotle subsequently produced an estimate of the Earth's circumference, and Eratosthenes famously came up with a measurement. It was a blindingly simple experiment, and quite brilliant. He knew that at noon on the Summer Solstice at Syene (now Aswan, Egypt) the Sun was directly overhead. He knew the distance from Syene to his home in Alexandria, and at noon on the Solstice he measured the length of a shadow cast by a rod at his home. Using the length of the rod and the length of the shadow, he was able to calculate the angle of the Sun's rays striking the Earth. He then multiplied this angle (as a fraction of a circle) by the distance from Alexandria to Syene: and this gave him his estimate of the circumference of the Earth.

We're not precisely sure what his estimate is in modern units, as we don't know exactly what units he used, but he was probably only 0.5 to 0.17% out. A modern repeat using more accurate measurements, and slightly amended assumptions, was carried out in 2012 and gave an estimate only 0.16% out from the currently accepted value (40,008km or 24,860 miles for the polar circumference). Eratosthenes's estimate dates to the third century BC, and, broadly speaking, the idea and proof of a spherical Earth spread out from there to all corners of the globe. Naturally, not everyone instantly bought into it, and some argued using statements that are still employed today. The last adopters of the spherical Earth were the Chinese in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when they had extended contact with astronomers and others from Europe.

Some cultures' creation myths had a flat Earth as part of their story: for example, the Norse myths and those of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Some have put forward the

*If the surface of water is flat, then the surface of the Earth must be flat*

about it believed that the Earth was flat, simply because when you looked, that is what you saw. Journeys by ship didn't stray too far from the coastline, so there was no chance of seeing boats disappearing over the horizon (more of this later). For the idea of a spherical Earth, we have to look to the ancient Greeks. Pythagoras, in the sixth century BC, seems to have been the first to come up with a spherical Earth, although this was not accepted by



idea that the Bible's Old Testament, and hence the Jewish people, believed in a Flat Earth. For most of these cultures, the broad idea was of a disc floating on water with a solid dome above it. Stars and planets, and the Sun and Moon, were generally believed to be embedded in this dome.

So initially the Earth was flat. Then it became spherical. And then, for some people, it became flat again. Who were these people and why did they go back to ideas that for most had been disproved nearly 2,000 earlier? And why is the idea apparently taking off again?

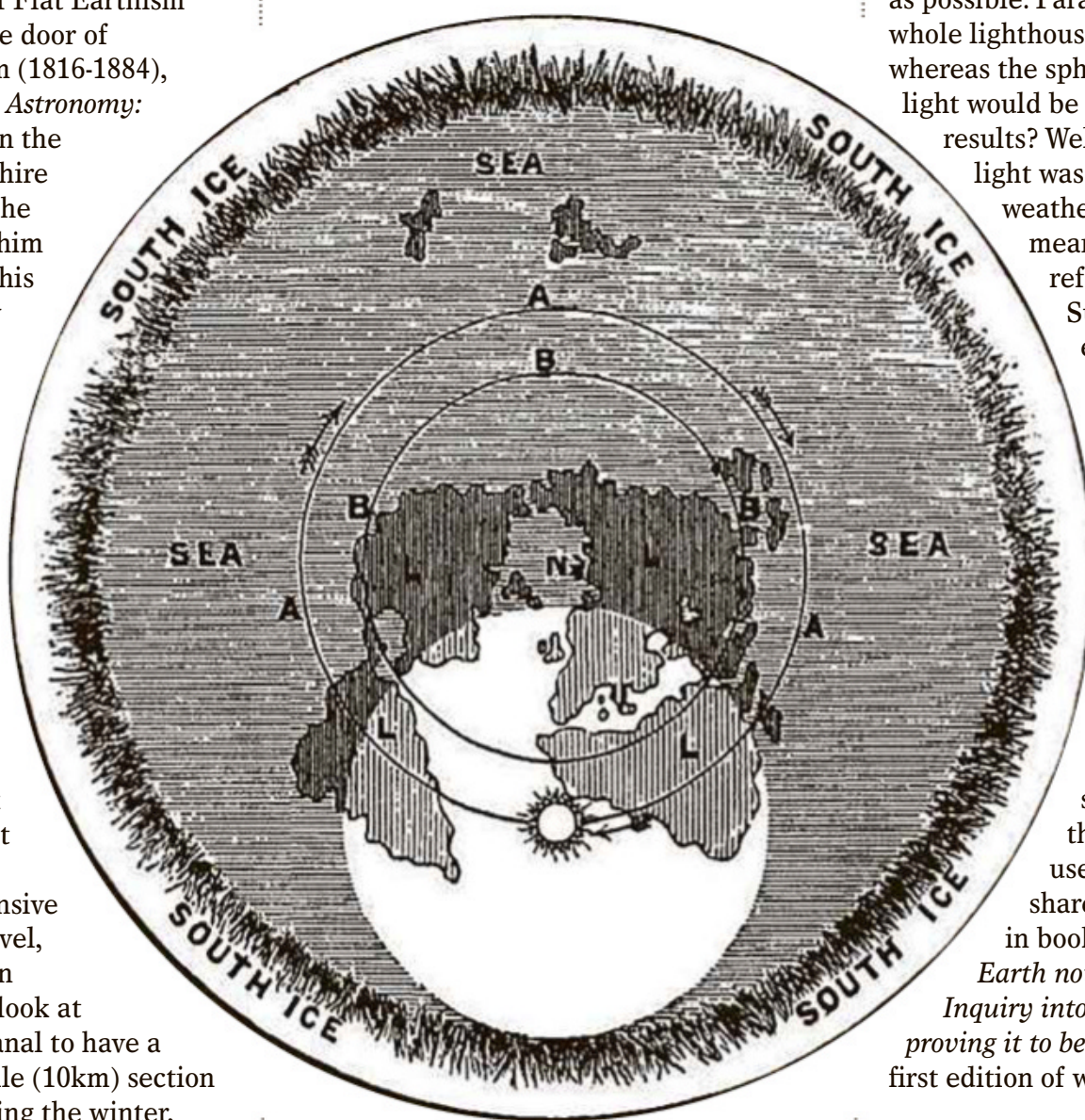
## ZETETIC ASTRONOMY

The modern resurgence of Flat Earthism can be placed firmly at the door of Samuel Birley Rowbotham (1816-1884), author of the book *Zetetic Astronomy: Earth Not a Globe*. Based in the famously flat Cambridgeshire Fens, his observations of the flat landscape all around him started to raise doubts in his mind about the sphericity of the Earth, so he set out to formalise his observations. He decided that determining the shape of the surface of water would allow him to determine the shape of the surface of the Earth. The idea was that if the surface of water is flat, then the surface of the Earth must be flat, and if the surface of water is convex then the planet itself must be convex.

Rowbotham made extensive use of the Old Bedford Level, a Cambridgeshire canal, in his observations. A quick look at Google Maps shows the canal to have a beautifully straight six-mile (10km) section with no obstructions. During the winter, Rowbotham would apparently lie flat on the ice and observe skaters some six miles distant. During the summer, he claimed he could see people entering the water for a swim from six miles away as well as boats sailing along the canal.

Rowbotham's observations, calculations and Bible readings led to his hypothesis that the Earth was a flat disc with the North Pole at its centre; around the edge of the disc was a continuous wall of ice (no sailing off the edge here) and the whole was a mere 6,000 years old. The disc-shaped Earth did not move; instead, the Sun made circuits of the Earth in a spiral pattern, with its furthest distance from the planet being 700 miles (1,130km), and a mere 400 (640km) when the Sun was over London. He subsequently revised these estimates so that the Sun was over 4,000 miles (6,400km) distant and the Moon and the stars no

more than 1,000 miles (1,600km) away. The Moon was luminous and self-illuminating, and the stars mere points of light, with the Earth being the only world. The Sun could only beam down light to the region it was above, hence day and night; during British summer the Sun was near the North Pole and during the winter it was closer to the ice wall. Sunrise and sunset were merely optical illusions caused by a special law of perspective. Solar eclipses were caused by the Moon passing in between the observer and the Sun; lunar eclipses were caused by a non-luminous body passing in front of the Moon. Tides were caused by the rising and falling of the Flat Earth as it floated



LEFT: A Flat Earth map from Rowbotham's 1865 edition of *Zetetic Astronomy*.

on the primordial waters. A ship vanishing over the horizon was due to refraction and perspective, and a circumnavigation of the Earth was simply a voyage round the edge of the disc.

Rowbotham set out on his crusade in 1849, giving lectures on his theories, using the pseudonym of 'Parallax', at which he offered for sale the 16-page pamphlet *Zetetic Astronomy: A Description of Several Experiments which Prove that the Surface of the Sea is a Perfect Plane and that the Earth is not a Globe* and its more snappily titled follow-up, *The Inconsistency of Modern Astronomy and its Opposition to the Scriptures*. Letter-writing campaigns to local astronomers and the Astronomer

Royal helped drum up a bit of publicity and ensure more bums on seats at his talks (some of which cost a shilling a time). Reports of the lectures say Parallax employed an anti-elitist rhetoric coupled with a plea for people to think and find out for themselves. He definitely won some converts, including one who carried on the cause after him.

In 1864, Parallax took part in a public demonstration of his theories at Plymouth Hoe. From the top of the cliff, the 59ft- (18m) tall Eddystone Lighthouse, 14 miles (22km) distant, could be seen in its entirety. Then observations were made on the beach with the telescope as close to sea level as possible. Parallax maintained that the whole lighthouse would still be visible, whereas the spherecists said that only its light would be seen. And what were the results? Well, actually only *half* of the

light was visible. This was due to the weather conditions that day, which meant that the air had less refractive power than normal.

Surely this offered greater evidence for a spherical Earth? But no, Parallax, announced the scientific predictions were wrong and that he had been vindicated – the Earth was indeed flat!

The majority of observers at the event did not look through the telescope themselves and did not hear the arguments of the scientists, so went away convinced that Parallax had won. He used the resulting publicity to share his findings with the world in book form: *Zetetic Astronomy: Earth not a Globe! An Experimental Inquiry into the True Figure of the Earth proving it to be an Immovable plane*, the first edition of which appeared in 1865.

## DOING THEIR LEVEL BEST

Inspired by Parallax's persuasive public oration, others published their own Flat Earth ideas, and the movement became more widely known. One independently wealthy follower, John Hampden, placed an advert in 1870 for a wager of between £50 and £500 to anyone who could prove the rotundity of the Earth. Alfred Russel Wallace, co-discoverer of the theory of evolution, fancied a crack at the money. He staked £500, and it was agreed that the Old Bedford Level, where Rowbotham had conducted his experiments, would be the location for the experiment. The idea was to place flags at the water's edge at one-mile intervals. A Flat Earth would show the flags level through a telescope; a convex Earth would show them gradually sinking lower and lower.

At the first attempt, the flags seemed





**LEFT:** Samuel Shenton, founder of the International Flat Earth Research Society, giving a talk to the Science Fiction Society at UCL in 1966. **BELOW:** Thomas Dolby's album *The Flat Earth*.

and journal and her society continued well into the 20th century. Eventually, in 1956, the International Flat Earth Research Society was formed by Samuel Shenton. He ran the group until 1971 and thus was the first Flat Earth proponent to have to deal with counter arguments from photographs and human witnesses beyond the plane of our planet. Shenton claimed the photos were deceptions caused by the use of wide-angle lenses, with evidence misinterpreted by untrained eyes. From 1971 until his death in 2001, Charles Johnson (see **FT147:26**) took over the running of the International Flat Earth Research Society, adding “of America” to its name. At the height of its fame it claimed over 3,500 members and issued a number of publications; membership started to decline from 1997.

In 2004 Daniel (no relation to Samuel) Shenton brought the group back to life, initially as a web forum and then as a membership society in 2009. The subsequent revamp of the website included a great deal of accessible literature and a helpful wiki. Musician Thomas Dolby was offered – and accepted – the first new membership, because he had brought out a 1984 album called *The Flat Earth*. Several other flat Earth groups appeared and disappeared from the 1970s on, including some splinter groups from other organisations.

Many Flat Earth ideas are now spread through a range of websites – along with controversies and disagreements. Not every self-described Flat Earther believes the same thing. For a start, is the Flat Earth round or diamond shaped? Some members seem to be involved just as an intellectual exercise, arguing a position they don't actually believe to hone their debating skills. Others appear to be in it just for a laugh, but the majority of members are serious.

Sometime around 2017, signs started to appear along the A9 in Scotland urging drivers to “Research Flat Earth” or simply proclaiming “The Earth is Flat”. Police still have no idea who produced the mainly Perthshire-based graffiti.

At the start of 2018, a shop appeared in Inverness called ‘The Flat Earth’. The outside displays posters and pamphlets, some asking questions about what we know about the spherical nature of the planet, its orbit and gravity. First to attract your eye is the claim: “You have been lied to. We do not live on a spherical rock hurtling through a vacuum.” One window features material about chemtrails and climate change as part of geo-engineering. Inside the shop there are postcards, greetings cards and a selection of books for sale, as well as a library. There are also T-shirts and mugs, and you can even buy a memory stick containing

to be all over the place, and they couldn't even tell the order they were in. A quick redesign took place, a better telescope was found, and the experiment was rerun. This time, two bridges six miles (10km) apart were used. From one, a sheet with a black band in its centre was hung; from the other, the telescope was positioned, and equidistant was a pole with a marker disc. The marker disc was the same height above the water as the black band and the telescope. Wallace had calculated that the disc should appear to be some five feet (1.5m) above the black band with the distances involved. He looked and that is exactly what he saw. The telescope was reset and Hampden's representative looked through it. He saw that the crosshair on the surveyor's telescope was above the marker disc at three miles (4.8km) and that the marker disc was a similar height above the black band at the distant bridge. William Carpenter then claimed that the equal distances between the cross hair, the centre disc and the bridge marker showed that all three points were in a straight line: therefore, the surface of the water was flat – and so the Earth was flat.

Hampden urged Wallace to admit he was beaten. Wallace refused to speak to him. Two referees were brought in. One was happy that Wallace had proven convexity; the other referee was Carpenter – unbeknownst to Wallace, a follower of Parallax; he went on to write *One Hundred Proofs That the Earth is Not a Globe* in 1885; see **FT389:56-57**) – who naturally stood by his original claim. An umpire was eventually provided, who found in favour of Wallace. Hampden threatened legal action if the money were paid to his rival. It was paid, and Zetetic Astronomers the world over filled the letter pages of newspapers. Carpenter published a pamphlet attacking Wallace and claiming that they had successfully demonstrated the flat Earth. Hampden published a similar pamphlet,

## Signs appeared along the A9 proclaiming “The Earth is Flat”

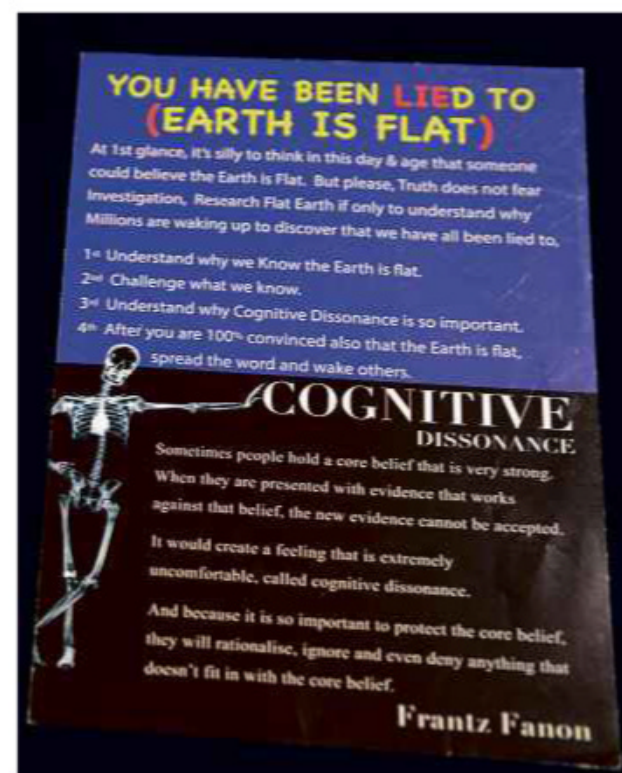


which was apparently “overflowing with ungentlemanly language”. Eventually, court proceedings over the slurs on Wallace were called and found in his favour; Hampden was told to pay £600 damages. Further court appearances ensued; Hampden transferred the money and declared himself bankrupt. He was eventually sentenced to two months in prison for his attacks on Wallace. Further such attacks led to another year's incarceration.

### THE FLAT EARTH TODAY

Rowbotham started Zetetic Societies in the UK and USA. Upon his death, a follower, Lady Elizabeth Blount, founded a Universal Zetetic Society, setting her sights somewhat higher. Lady Blount published a magazine





ABOVE LEFT: The Flat Earth shop that opened in Inverness in 2018. ABOVE RIGHT: The windows are lined with posters and pamphlets dealing with the Flat Earth and urging a zetetic approach to the question “What shape is our planet?”

all their literature to take home and peruse at your leisure.

Their website has a reading list, pieces explaining their arguments for a Flat Earth (and the supposed problems of chemtrails) and details of a £10,000 curvature challenge. All you have to do is to “find curvature in a demonstrable way” and to show “tangible and not visible evidence”. In particular, the challenge is laid at the door of surveyors – as when they are building large structures, then surely the curvature of the Earth must come into play?

I contacted ‘The Flat Earth’ through its website and Richard Birkett said he was more than happy to meet and chat with me. So I appeared at the shop one day, where I was offered a comfy sofa and tea or coffee. As we sat down, Richard told me I could not record our conversation and that questions relating to him were off limits: we were here to talk solely about the flat Earth.

I started off by asking what evidence there was for a Flat Earth. Richard replied that there was no evidence for curvature of the Earth, and that no one makes allowance for it when flying a plane, firing missiles, or building large construction projects. I pointed out that a pilot just has to keep a constant height over the mean sea level at which they are flying, and that the aircraft would automatically follow any curvature of the Earth below.

Richard claimed the only evidence for us living on a globe is that of photographs; as such, it is not scientific. NASA (as usual) have simply been faking it all with CGI and Photoshop. One of the shop’s leaflets gives some examples of this. For example, a photo of Elon Musk’s Tesla travelling through space shows two versions: one with a black backdrop and one with a beautiful vista of stars. The images are captioned:

“It seems you need Photoshop to help with your reality.” My first thought was the Tesla is in bright light; like the Moon photographs, it was taken during daytime when it was too light to see the stars. My second thought was to do a quick Google search of images of the Tesla in space. Not a single one had stars on it: the only photo of a Tesla showing stars in the background that I could find is the one in this leaflet. Also, Musk is not NASA; but I suppose you could argue he would bend the knee to them if he wants lucrative contracts.

Another claim in the same leaflet is that training of astronauts takes place in water tanks – and when we watch ‘actual’ space walks we can still see the bubbles...

Gravity is apparently an illusion, or more specifically “a load of nonsense, inductive reasoning – an interpretation of an observation”. Things fall down because they are heavier than the surrounding medium. We’ve never seen objects attracted to each other by reason of their mass. I mentioned the 1774 Schiehallion experiment to calculate the mean density of the Earth, which showed the deviation from vertical demonstrated by a pendulum placed next to a mountain, a phenomenon due to known magnetic effects in the atmosphere.

I asked about our own observations of celestial bodies: we can use telescopes to see that other planets and moons are spherical, so why should our planet be different to the others?

“Why do we correlate what we see with other planets to our planet? There’s no reason to assume anything is similar to Earth. Even if it were, there is no direct relation to curvature or otherwise of the Earth”.

Such observations, Richard suggested, are due to atmospheric effects and a desire to maintain the status quo: we ‘know’ the Earth is round and so we won’t accept

evidence to the contrary. And the big question: *why are we being lied to?*

Predictably, it’s all about control, by NASA, governments, whoever. The ruling elite will do anything to keep us all where they want us. Personally, I don’t quite understand this argument: in my day-to-day life it makes little difference if the Earth is spherical or flat, so why lie to me about that, of all things? Surely it’s just one more big lie that needs to be maintained? I concluded that I must be one of those ‘sheeple’ I’ve heard about.

We didn’t manage to agree on very much, and I got the feeling that Richard’s spiel was the one he always used on people. He was a little confrontational at times, but once we’d finished the interview, he became a lot more friendly and we chatted about a few less contentious subjects than the Flat Earth. I’m perfectly willing to listen to Flat Earthers, and if they can show me the evidence then I would be willing to change my current world view – but I’ve so far seen nothing that would convince me to do so. All the evidence I *have* seen leads me to believe in gravity, outer space and a spherical planet. But the majority of Flat Earthers also appear quite genuine in their beliefs; perhaps we need to get together somewhere really flat, armed with some flags and a telescope....

✦ **GORDON RUTTER** founded and continues to run the Edinburgh Fortean Society. A regular contributor to FT for many years, he is by day a biology teacher.

#### FURTHER READING

Eric Dubay, *The Flat Earth Conspiracy*, Lulu.com, 2014.

*Flat Earth: The History of an Infamous Idea*, Christine Garwood, MacMillan, 2007.

The Flat Earth, Inverness: [flatearthinverness.com](http://flatearthinverness.com)

PHOTOS: GORDON RUTTER



# “LIFTED UP FROM THE EARTH”

## JESUS AND THE TEMPTATIONS, PART TWO

Last issue we saw Jesus transported to a “high place” and tempted by ‘the Adversary’. But who was this ‘Adversary’, and why did Jesus go with him? **BOB RICKARD** takes a critical look at an alternative life of Jesus in the context of a magical mid-air battle.

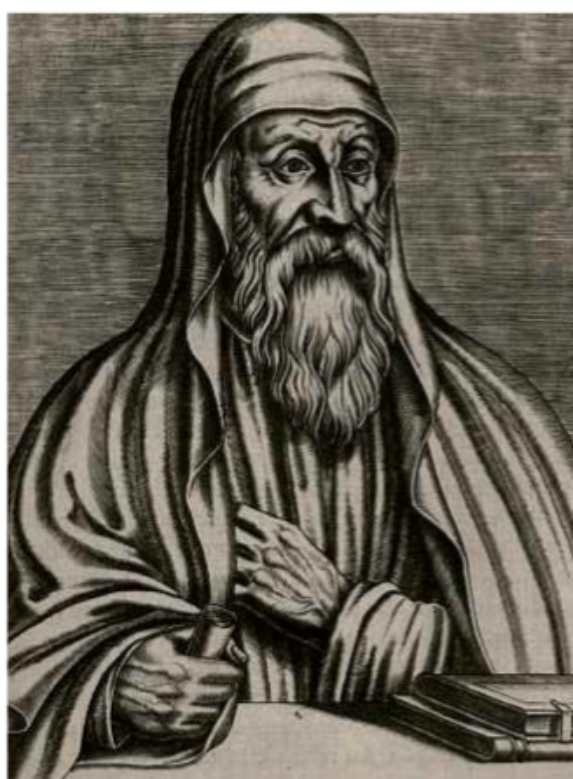
The idea that Jesus was a magician did not originate with Morton Smith, but his influential study *Jesus the Magician* (1981) certainly enlivened the debate. Significantly, the idea was put forward in the second century by Celsus, a pagan Greek philosopher and critic of Christianity, who questioned Jesus’s parentage and accused him of sorcery.<sup>1</sup> This earned a learned rebuttal from the Christian apologist Origen of Alexandria in AD 248,<sup>2</sup> but other anti-Christian diatribes began to appear, some more dangerous than others.

One of these – a blasphemous parody of Jesus’s life and legend called the *Toledot Yeshu*<sup>3</sup> – has a direct bearing on our topic. It was one of the main sources used by Sir William Crookes in his groundbreaking analysis of levitation phenomena because its centrepiece is an aerial battle between Judas and Jesus – therein called Yeshu<sup>4</sup> – that takes place after the theft of a powerful magical formula.

The *Toledot Yeshu* is a pastiche of scraps of Jewish folklore, vague historical references, derogatory gossip and angry satire. It was obviously propaganda aimed at undermining Christian faith and confidence, most probably in retaliation for the persecution of Jewish communities in those times and the erosion of their faith caused by apostates. Because the *Toledot* slanders Jesus and His Mother, any scholarly discussion of it by Christian commentators meant that its more scurrilous passages were censored, hidden behind ellipses, euphemisms and slabs of obscure Latin text until they were revealed by modern scholarship.

The first versions of it circulated secretly among Jewish communities as oral traditions. From the Middle Ages onward, hand-written *samizdat* manuscripts appeared before the first printed versions.<sup>5</sup> Over time, the Jewish diaspora gave rise to a number of regional variations.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I have abstracted the salient details from the summary made by Crookes from the best-known Wagenseil edition.<sup>7</sup>

This story of Yeshu is set in Judea, several



LEFT: Origen, whose *Contra Celsus* (248) rebutted the argument of the Greek philosopher that Jesus had performed his miracles by means of black magic. FACING PAGE: *Jesus Taken Up Onto a High Mountain* in one of the 350 watercolours from James Tissot’s epic series *The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*.

### *An aerial battle takes place after the theft of a magical formula*

decades before the birth of the ‘historical’ Jesus, during the reign of Helene (141-67 BC), the widow of King Jannæus (127-76 BC), when the Pharisees rose to power. The *Toledots* generally agree in telling us that Yeshu’s mother was tricked into premarital sex by someone pretending to be her betrothed husband.<sup>8</sup> As a result, her son Yeshu was an ‘outsider’, regarded by the Pharisees as “doubly polluted”. Not only was he born a bastard, they said, his mother had been *niddah* (the Hebrew term for a menstruating woman or one who has not completed her post-menstruation purification bath) at the time of his conception.

This dogmatic prejudice against Yeshu

fuelled his discontent and, despite his obvious acumen, he was scorned for his arrogance in disrespecting tradition and his teachers. When he was refused training as a rabbi, he travelled – some sources say, to Egypt – to learn magic, and returned to Galilee with a plan to create his own following. This necessitated an audacious theft of the *Tetragrammaton*<sup>9</sup> – the magical and holy Name of God – from the Great Temple.

#### STEALING THE NAME

It was said that the letters of the Holy Name were found engraved – made naturally by no mortal hand – on the Foundation Stone of the First Temple, kept as a treasure in the Holy of Holies of the Great Temple.

The correct declamation of the Name was known only to the sanctioned high priest and reserved for the most solemn rites; but whoever learned the ‘secret’ might use it for whatever magical purpose he wished. It was also said that “the Sages kept the Stone in the temple Adytum, guarded by Lions of brass that were bound to the two iron pillars at the doorway. Anyone who entered and tried to learn the Name would be so startled by the Lions roaring at him as he left that he would immediately forget the Holy formula.”

To cut a long story short, Yeshu hid in the Temple to learn the ‘secret’. Then he copied the letters of the Name onto a scrap of parchment which he sealed in a deep cut on his thigh. As expected, the lions roared as he passed by and the formula was blanked from his memory. On returning home, he reopened the thigh wound and read his note. “Thus, he remembered and obtained the use of the letters.”

With the magical power provided by the Divine Word, Yeshu works wonders







throughout Galilee – healing the sick, exorcising spirits, bringing clay birds to life, floating on millstones and even, by the proof of his miracles, declaring himself to be the “Son of God”. His successes inevitably come to the attention of the Greater Sanhedrin in Jerusalem who, with considerable panic, realize that Yeshu has stolen the Ineffable Name.

This terrifying calamity – a rogue messiah on the loose with absolute magical power – called for a drastic solution. The Sanhedrin deputed an accomplished rabbi to obtain the ‘secret’ and use it to contest Yeshu and to expose his messianic claims before the multitudes that now followed him. Judas accepted the task, but first asked the members of the Sanhedrin to take upon themselves the sin of the necessary trespass.

Thus sanctioned, Judas acquires the power of the correct declamation of the Name and proceeds to Galilee where he replicates every miracle performed by Yeshu. However, as both are empowered by the same source, the contest is drawn.

Yeshu is arraigned before the queen. In her court, and in the presence of the Sanhedrin and Judas, he boasts: “It is spoken of me, ‘I will ascend into Heaven’.” The account says: “He lifted his arms like the wings of an eagle, and he flew between Heaven and Earth, to the amazement of everyone.” The elders then ask Judas to again replicate Yeshu’s feats. As Crookes puts it: “In each, this results in levitations and aerial journeys of both together, and they are simultaneously seen over the Temple. In each, the Adversary’s aim is a precipitation of Yeshu from a great height into the crowds of the Holy City. In each, he fails.”

This *impasse* is resolved by curious trickery, continues the *Toledot*. Because neither could prevail against the other “for both had the use of the Ineffable Name, [Judas] *defiled* Yeshu, so that they both lost their power and fell down to the earth, and in their condition of defilement the letters of the Ineffable Name escaped from them.”

Yeshu was captured and mocked but escaped. In the ensuing hostilities, his followers rescued him, hiding him in Antioch. Burning with resentment, Yeshu returns to Jerusalem, before the next Passover, to once again steal the Name. Alerted by Judas, the authorities promptly seize Yeshu before he can reach his goal.<sup>10</sup> “He was put to death as soon as Passover ended and later buried outside the city.”

This parody of the Biblical account of Jesus’s capture and execution need not detain us further (it can easily be found in my references) except for one curious detail – this matter of the *defilement* of their magic, which we now address.

### TRANSLATING THE UNTRANSLATABLE

Crookes wrote that he found the blasphemous description of the *dénouement* of the aerial conflict between Yeshu and Judas to be “untranslatable”. He did not



## Simon Magus was performing magic in Rome to prove himself to be a god

mean that it could *not* be translated, because many scholars had already done so. He was held back by his own sense of propriety about what was being implied by the word “defiled”.

One such scholar is Ruth Karras, who has made a detailed study of this precise matter.<sup>11</sup> Of the *Toledots*, she writes, that “often, the nature of the blasphemy was not recorded, either because to repeat it would have been shocking in itself or because it was more effective simply to hint darkly at the horrible things that were said.” Crookes had opted for the latter, in Latin.

Karras identifies several passages that tell us more about this magical contamination or *defiling*. The following – translated from the Hebrew in Wagenseil’s 1681 version – is, presumably, the passage that Crookes had difficulty with. “When Judas saw that he could not corrupt Jesus, he *urinated* on Jesus and they were both contaminated and fell to the ground and could not use the Name because they were contaminated.”

Other versions emphasise that the urination – difficult enough, one would imagine, during a mid-air struggle – ‘polluted’ *both* combatants and that they remained impure until they could be ‘cleansed’ according to Talmudic rites. Indeed, Wagenseil noted that Yeshu – preparing for his second intrusion into the

LEFT: Simon Magus plummets from the sky to land in Rome’s Via Sacra, as pictured in a mediæval French Book of Hours.

adytum – purified himself by bathing in the Jordan. In the scholarly debate about this double act of pollution, the likelihood is raised that the ‘urination’ itself might be a euphemism for a more shocking slander.<sup>12</sup>

### THE BATTLE OF TWO SIMONS

As mythologists have noted, there are precedents for aerial magical battles. Certainly, there are variations of it in various forms of shamanism, confirming Crookes’s early suggestion that this was a familiar method in ancient cultures by which a magician or miracle-worker – for example, Apollonius of Tyana – gained a following.

Probably the best known of these conflicts is the aerial confrontation between the Apostle Simon Peter and the ‘magician’ Simon Magus, as recorded in Acts 8:9-24. Attempts to date the extant accounts seem only to confirm the notion that the Simon Magus legend appropriated details from the *Toledot* account of the contest at the court of Queen Helene. In particular, as Crookes points out, *both descriptions* say the antagonists were “simultaneously seen over the Temple” and that the aim of the ‘villain’ was “to precipitate [our hero] from a great height into the crowds”.

Scholars agree that the complex character of ‘Simon the Magician’ involves several different ideas about his identity, deeds and influence upon the Roman Church. By this point, he had already alienated the Christians by elbowing his way to become Simon Peter’s number one disciple, and also by his offer to buy the ‘secret’ of doing miracles (from which we get the word ‘simony’).

As the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* tells it, Simon Magus was charming the crowd in the Forum of Rome, performing magic using ‘hypnotic illusions’, to prove himself, like Yeshu, to be a god. He challenged the crowd to choose between himself and Simon Peter’s Jesus by promising to levitate on the morrow. Came the hour, the crowd saw him rise into the air above the Forum. Peter prayed, asking God to end the spectacle without killing Simon. Perhaps, he suggested to God thoughtfully, just breaking Simon’s legs would be enough.

Simon is seen to stop in mid-air then fall into a road called the *Via Sacra*, breaking his legs “in three parts”. The crowd turned against the Magus and stoned him, leaving him lying in the street. As in the *Toledot*, where Yeshu’s followers “retrieve him and carry him, gravely injured, to the home of one of his sponsors”, so too was Simon. The Magus, however, is said to have died “while being sorely cut by two physicians”.

The meteorologist-turned-minister, Ernest L Martin (1932-2002) has argued that Simon Magus was previously a Samaritan elder and therefore fully knowledgeable





ABOVE: The two Simons – Simon Peter and Simon Magus – appear before Nero at right, with the martyrdom of Peter shown at left, after a fresco by Filippino Lippi, 1481-82. RIGHT: The aerial combat between the two Simons, from the *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493.

about the magical and mystical practices of the Assyrian and Babylonian priesthoods. There is evidence that he was revered by the Samaritans as a god incarnate and increased his cult following by travelling widely. In Rome, he seemed to be creating a personal synthesis of these elements and the ‘Good News’ of the Apostles.<sup>13</sup> On reaching Rome, in the days of Claudius Cæsar (AD 45), his performances so impressed the Romans that a statue was erected to him between two bridges over the Tiber, and bore the inscription “*Simoni deo Sancto*” (“The Holy God Simon”).<sup>14</sup>

Martin points out that the patristic ‘authorities’ – particularly Justin, who refers to a “Simon in Rome” – are talking about Simon Magus, *not* Simon Peter. It may also be relevant to our discussion that the Romans gave Simon Magus the soubriquet ‘Simon Pater’ – so close to Simon Peter – ‘Pater’ being an honorific title associated with the god Jupiter (the Roman version of Zeus) who ruled all things celestial. Despite this heavenly connection, Martin argues, the aerial battle between the two Simons *never really happened*, as the story of it seems to have originated around the fourth century, which is several centuries *later* than the first signs of the *Toledot Yeshu*. He claims that the fiction was preserved by Christians as useful propaganda. We can only wonder how much *else* the writers of the *Toledot* borrowed from other, older, mythologies.<sup>15</sup>

To complicate matters further, Simon Peter is confused with another possible levitator, the rabbi known as Simon (or Simeon, Shimon) Kepha (or Cephas). At least *four* versions of the *Toledot* include a curious postscript which blurs Simon Peter (as Simeon Kepha) into Simeon Stylites



(who is also said to have ‘borrowed’ the secret of the Holy Name). The dating error of centuries between Simon Peter and Simeon Stylites was certainly noted by Crookes. This latter Simeon (c.390-459) was a Syrian ascetic saint who achieved notability for

living and preaching for many years on a small platform (see FT180:16, 259:74-77, 344:8-9). It is commonly said that Simon Peter was crucified, supposedly upside-down, sometime during Nero’s reign; but the precise date of his death remains unknown.





**LEFT:** Christ ascends to Heaven above his disciples in a 17th century etching by M Küßell after JW Baur. **FACING PAGE:** Jesus seems to be having trouble attaining altitude in this beautiful coloured engraving of unknown authorship and date.

## YET MORE AERIAL COMBAT

During his research in the Oriental Department of the British Museum, the Theosophist editor, George Mead, found other ‘alternative’ lives of Jesus. One of the most interesting was not a *Toledot*, but obviously based upon one. This was a book of polemics called *The Touchstone*<sup>16</sup> by ‘Schem-tob ibn Schaprut’, a Spanish Jewish physician of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the story follows the familiar form, except for its ending and being set in the time of Tiberius Cæsar. It tells of Yeshu, here called ‘Jeschu ha-Notzri’, who was brought before Tiberius, Pilate and the Sanhedrin elders, only for him to boast of his miracles, which included causing barren women to conceive. Tiberius replies: “On that will I test you. I have a daughter who has not yet seen a man; make it that she conceive.” The unlucky girl was then brought into court and Jeschu “whispered over her and she became pregnant”.

Eventually, “the time came to crucify him, and when he saw the cross about the fourth hour of the day, [Jeschu] spake words of magic, flew away and sat himself upon Mount Carmel.” At this point, the character in the role of Adversary, the equivalent of Judas – here called “R[abbi] Juda the gardener” – said to the Sanhedrin: “I will go after him and bring him back.” He is advised by the elders to “Go, utter and pronounce the name of his Lord, that is the *Shem ha-Mephoresch*.” So “Juda went and flew after him. When he would seize him, Jeschu spake words of magic, went into the cave of Elias,<sup>17</sup> and shut

the door. Juda the gardener came and said to the cave: ‘Open, for I am God’s messenger’. It opened. Thereupon Jeschu made himself into a bird. R. Juda seized him by the hem of his garment” and “brought him before the Sanhedrin.”<sup>18</sup> While this was not an actual battle, an aerial chase is a well-known folkloric variant.

Before we leave Mead, he has one more gift for us. The last entry in his book mentions a letter from “a Jewish friend”, relaying a *memorat* “from ancient Poland” that was found among Jewish “old wives’ tales”. This was an oral *toledot* loosely following the others up to the point of “the robbing of the *Shem*, and the doing of wonders”. Here, it is Rabbi Meir<sup>19</sup> who volunteers to the Sanhedrin “to profane his own powers to bring about the fall of Jeschu” – in other words to be the Adversary. He contests with Jeschu in the air and both fall to the ground. Rabbi Meir later tried to calm the Jewish people suffering from Roman oppression. Once again, he used the extraordinary powers of the divine Name, “and mounted into the air, exclaiming: ‘Lo! I fly higher than Jeschu flew, as a sign that he hath sent me to institute your festivals.’ And this he did with great wisdom, so that the Jewish festivals should always come first and be spent more happily.”<sup>20</sup>

## “IF I BE LIFTED UP FROM THE EARTH”

Jesus had only one direct levitation, his final Ascension. The translocations during his Temptation trials (as I noted in part one) read more like teleportations, or the

sort of ‘magical flights’ that the old Witch Hammerers called ‘*transvection*’.

We have accounts from the lives of the saints of levitations inspired by Jesus’s Ascension taking place on the Feast of the Ascension. The rarest of the rare are a few cases in which the levitant went so high, it was said, that they *disappeared from sight*. One of these, from the *Life of St Colette of Corbie* (1381-1447), says her Poor Clare sisters saw her “several times soaring in the air and being lifted up so high as to be out of sight.”<sup>21</sup> Father Herbert Thurston wondered whether – unlike Jesus, whose altitude was obscured by clouds – those who were lost to sight at some point during their elevation might have become invisible... or perhaps were translated to somewhere else. He acknowledged, however, that this was pure speculation.<sup>22</sup>

The Ascension of Jesus – 40 days after his resurrection – is generally understood to have been a direct vertical take-off into the clouds. The newly risen Jesus led his disciples to Bethany, where he instructed and then blessed them. “While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into the heaven.” (Luke 24:51). In case that last is interpreted as some sort of Apollonian vanishing trick, Acts 1:9 says, explicitly: “He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”

The principal characters in these stories – particularly those of ‘Jesus’ and ‘Judas’ – are revealed as fusions of cultural images, coalesced from various strands of legend over time, each reflecting different experiences of social history. Against the dominance of the Gospels across Western Europe in the second millennium, a cultish enclave of Jewish anti-Christian propaganda drew on ancient stories of blasphemy, disgrace and contamination to lessen the worth of their oppressors. In doing this, they have, inadvertently, preserved for us these interesting versions of some paranatural phenomena.

Of course, none of this is proof of the actuality of levitation or teleportation, but it does show evidence of the idea, at least, in antiquity, as it manifested in two important processes. One demonstrates that the phenomena form a significant part of a particular magical view of the world; the other is its association with some form of shamanistic practice and magical control. Both topics deserve a thorough investigation.

🔗 **BOB RICKARD** started *Fortean Times* in 1973 and was its co-editor for 30 years. He is the author of numerous books and articles on forteana and strange phenomena.



## NOTES

**1** R Joseph Hoffmann, a humanist historian, member of the Centre for Inquiry and a founder of the *Jesus Project* (which investigates the historicity of Jesus) has studied the association of the early Christians with such allegations as the use of magic and deception. See his critical studies of three sources: Marcion (1982), Celsus (1987), and Porphyry (1994).

**2** Origen, *Contra Celsum*, bk.1, ch.6.

**3** According to Prof. Peter Schäfer, the *Toledot Yeshu* is “one of the most controversial books in history”. It was the product of an unknown number of anonymous Jewish writers from the second century onwards. Translations were used by Christian apologists to illustrate the ‘crimes’ of the Jews. There are well over 100 known recensions in Aramaic, Persian, Yiddish and other languages.

**4** *Yeshu* is a Hebrew name that sometimes has been applied to Jesus in Rabbinical literature. It can be dated back to the *Babylonian Talmud*, between the third and fifth centuries. It is a name with a lot of negative connotations, having been used in connection with heretics, sorcerers, idolaters and enemies of Israel. NB: The implied start of the story of *Yeshu* is at least eight decades *before* the generally accepted birthdate of the historical Jesus between 6 and 4 BC.

**5** In 1970, Schäfer and colleagues at Princeton University began a huge project to collate the available versions into a definitive structure. See Schäfer, ed., *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus Revisited* (2011). Hans Dieter Betz notes that the earliest *written* fragment of the *Toledot Yeshu* dates from *no earlier* than the 10th century.

**6** One of the first printings was in 1681, after the Strasbourg version provided ammunition for Martin Luther’s mid-16th century anti-Semitic outbursts. See Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (1994). The best-known printed version was translated by the German Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633-1705) and published in the second volume of his *Satan’s Fiery Darts (Tela Ignea Satanae)* of 1691. A number of transcripts are readily accessible. One,



allegedly dated to the 14th century (but containing elements of 6th century versions), appears in Morris Goldstein’s *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* (1950) pp148-154 and can also be found online at: <http://jewishchristianlit.com/Topics/JewishJesus/toledoth.htm>. George Mead presents his own analysis of the earlier Strasbourg MS recension in *Did Jesus live in 100 BC?* (1903), pp258-280.

**7** William Crookes, ‘Human Levitation, illustrating Certain Historical Miracles’ in *Quarterly Journal of Science* (Jan 1875, pp31-61).

**8** It is important to note that the *Quran* steadfastly holds that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus’s conception. Indeed, Islamic scholars argue that the *Toledot* libel is an example of Jewish perfidy. The insinuation that Mary was not a virgin when she conceived Jesus “started at least as early as the second century” and “was used by opponents of Christianity, including the Jews,” writes the

Iraqi Qu’ran scholar Louay Fatoohi. He refers to the “tremendous calamity... of [this Jewish calumny] against Mary”. Fatoohi, *The Mystery of the Historical Jesus*, 2007, p119. It is also worth remembering that those Jewish authors of the *Toledot Yeshu* did not represent mainstream Jewish opinion.

**9** Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) in his thesis on ‘Natural Magic’ argued that the Holy Name – the ‘*Shem HaMephorash*’ – was a source of divine power. “Whoever knows the true pronunciation of the name... has the world in his mouth. When it is spoken angels are stirred by the wave of sound. It rules all creatures, works all miracles.” Agrippa, *Three Books on Occult Philosophy*, 1531, 1898 ed., p242.

**10** Yet another recension of the *Toledot* – used by its editor ‘Bahumuth’ on the *Lost History* website (<https://lost-history.com/toldoth.php>) provides a very different view of Judas’s theft of the Name. “About the middle of the night God put the bastard [Yeshu] into

a deep sleep, and Judas enchanted him in his sleep. Then Judas entered Yeshu’s tent, and with a knife cut his flesh and took out from him the sacred parchment. Yeshu awoke out of sleep in fright by a great and horrid demon.” In this version, now unable to compete with Judas, Yeshu is caught and executed.

**11** See Ruth Mazo Karras, ‘The Aerial Battle in the *Toledot Yeshu* and Sodomy in the Late Middle Ages’, in *Medieval Encounters*, no 19, 2013, pp493-533.

**12** Karras goes further, pointing to other versions of the *Toledot* that assert that Judas buggered Yeshu – an act made even more preposterous by occurring in mid-air, but one that qualifies as defiling them both.

**13** Martin’s contentious thesis is that Simon Magus, *not Simon Peter*, is the true founder of Roman Catholicism, and his paper sets out his detailed argument as a challenge to the Universal Church, accusing them of institutionalising

“simony, imagery, idolatry and paganism”. Ernest L Martin, *Simon Peter versus Simon the Sorcerer*, 2012, published online by the Arctic Beacon Forbidden Library.

**14** *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, vol 4, p682.

**15** In his *Secret History of the World*, Mark Booth writes: “In fact the life of Christ Jesus as it has come down to us might look like a patchwork of events in the lives of those who came before him: born to a carpenter and a Virgin, like Krishna; born on December 25, like Mithras; heralded by a star in the East, like Horus; walking on water and feeding the five thousand from a small basket, like Buddha; performing healing miracles, like Pythagoras; raising from the dead, like Elisha; executed on a tree, like Adonis; ascending to heaven, like Hercules, Enoch and Elijah.” Booth, 2008, p198. One could be forgiven for presuming that, over periods of time, narrative elements about gods and heroes not only become mutable and interchangeable, but are progressively coalescing.

**16** See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn\\_Shaprut](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Shaprut). The British Museum copy of *The Touchstone* is given by George Mead as “Add. 26964”. Noting that it “has never been printed as a whole”, he worked from a German translation made by Austrian Talmudic scholar Samuel Krauss (1866-1948) and appended to Krauss’s *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen (Jesus’ life according to Jewish sources)*, Berlin, 1902. See GRS Mead, *Did Jesus Live in 100 BC?*, 1903, p297.

**17** Elias is the Latin version of Elijah. 1 Kings 19.9 tells of a cave on Mt Horeb where Elijah heard God’s voice after he had travelled 40 days and nights. There is also a ‘Cave of Elijah’ on Mt Carmel.

**18** Mead, 1903, pp298-301.

**19** Rabbi Meir is one of the famous sages whose oral teachings are recorded in the first written *Mishnah*, at the beginning of the third century. He was a student of the even more celebrated Rabbi Akiva, but is mentioned in no other *Toledot*.

**20** Mead, 1903, pp439-440.

**21** Thurston, *Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, 1928, p55.

**22** Thurston, 1928, p180.



THE HIEROPHANT'S APPRENTICE PRESENTS

# BUILDING A FORTEAN LIBRARY

## NO 54. SPECIAL FRIENDS FOR SMALL PEOPLE

Before we begin, a temporary lapse into the first person by this instalment's writer, and a declaration of interest. I had an imaginary friend when I was about four, living on a farm in Huntingdonshire. As far as I recall he appeared only when I was playing alone outside in the farmyard, and only when my sister was away at boarding school, which during the day left only my mother, who was generally busy with various animals and other chores, for company. Dooley – of whose existence my mother was fully aware, and entirely unbothered – and I would chat about this and that, and practise 'driving' the various busted tractors lurking about the place. Dooley was as invisible to me as he was to anyone else, which goes against the grain of most of Michael Hallowell's accounts, and against his argument that 'imaginary friends' don't generally appear *only* to lonely children. Although there are plenty of ways of being lonely, no matter how large the company. My exception to the general rule made Hallowell's book of peculiar interest, apart from its special claim to be the first study of the phenomenon of its kind. I also have a friend, an artist and sculptor, who also had an invisible-to-everyone-including-himself childhood friend. His was called Jingly Joe. Whenever he was hauled into his Dad's study for a good wiggin', he would look down at somewhere around knee height and say ruefully, "Slide down the penguin, Jingly Joe!" Which, as intended, ruined the solemn atmosphere, caused his Dad to crack up, and lightened the consequent penances. So, his and my experience of the imaginary friend became my presumption of normality in this odd but undisturbing phenomenon. Not so, it turns out. Here endeth my lesson. Now to the book.

At the start of *Invizikids: The Curious Enigma of 'Imaginary' Childhood Friends*, Michael Hallowell pitches straight in with an account of his two childhood friends, illustrating a couple more seeming specifics about these entities. The first appeared to him while he was in the kitchen, and at first "frightened the living daylights" out of him. "Hello," she said, "my name's Maureen and I want to be your friend." And so they became, running riot around the house as toddlers will, although Hallowell didn't understand why his parents didn't acknowledge her presence, even though on occasion he would ask his mother to lay a place at table for her. One day she seemed terribly upset; within a day or so of that, the Hallowell family moved house, and Maureen was seen no more. At the new house another little girl, Elizabeth, arrived to keep Hallowell company. Like Maureen, she was invisible to all but the

wee lad, but a good deal more posh, so Hallowell was "in awe" of her. She stayed around until the family moved again, when Hallowell was about eight.

So, we may note a couple of things here. First these entities seemed tied to the place they first appeared, which turns out to be a common experience. Second, the parents seem to have been not at all concerned – another common theme among the cases recounted here. And then Hallowell remarks that when his friends were allowed to sit down to dinner, he saw them eat the food, but his mother did not. As he puts it, he and she seemed to be inhabiting two separate realities at the same time. This raises all manner of interesting questions – or perhaps simply testifies to the power of human imagination.

Some will naturally wonder whether it was the boy's or the mother's imagination that was the more powerful in this case.

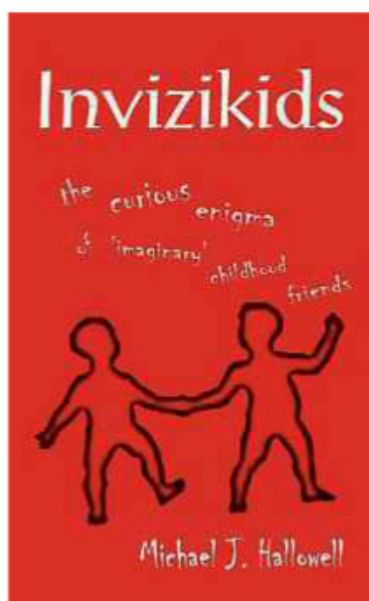
Inevitably, Hallowell wants to

impose his own terminology on this odd phenomenon. He comes up with a mouthful: Quasi-Corporeal Companions, mercifully reduced to QCCs most of the time. 'Quasi corporeal' because so many of the entities seem utterly solid to the percipients; and "I choose to use the word 'companion' because the word is both less intimate and less 'loaded' than the term friend," he writes. Since not all QCCs are precisely friendly, and some not even remotely human, this seems fair enough.

And equally inevitably – as anyone would, in other words – he attempts a taxonomy of the experience. Here, apart from the abundance of case histories, we begin to see the extraordinary range of the imaginary friends' manifestations, which is rather wider than one might expect. Hallowell's four categories are: 1: Invizikids; 2: Elementals; 3: Animals; 4: Animates.

Within these categories there is only a limited amount of internal consistency, which is perhaps only to be expected given that these are by definition highly individual experiences. (One might draw a parallel with the alien abduction experience, which with the withdrawal or demise of its most vocal exponents has turned out to be much more variegated than the standardised accounts would have had you believe.) Type 1 Invizikids are as near 'standard' as the phenomenon gets: companions who look like 'us', are generally amiable, and playful, and sometimes actually helpful, either with good advice or sometimes (it seems) practical intervention in mundane affairs. Apart from these characteristics, they are always reticent, not to say downright evasive, about where they come from. Hallowell hints that they – assuming they have an independent existence – don't necessarily know themselves.

Something Hallowell noticed was the frequent oddity of the names of the entities, of whatever type, which were "often dissociated culturally from their apparent background. Chinese doctors would be called Ian, Buddhist monks would be named Brian, and ancient Sumerian warlords carry the illustrious epithet Kevin or Norman. One correspondent... had a QCC called Wilma. Wilma was a Japanese mermaid who had, if we believe her story, died in the mid-





15th century.” And he adds: “QCCs of a seemingly British-European origin, whom would often expect to have regular names like Joe, Jill, or Dianne, may sometimes have bizarre names like Gooty, Frab-Frab or Graloona.” Hallowell wonders if in some cases the children give their ‘friends’ the names, and they are quite happy to accept them. This seems likely, given the odd names people can bestow upon their pets: we once knew an Afghan hound called Squim, and (more comprehensibly) a cat named Esme Weatherwax.

Hallowell treats us to a brief history of the idea of ‘elementals’ (his Type 2). Like the elementals of classical lore, these are outdoor entities associated with a particular place. In one instance, an experient who met hers in a mango grove lost contact when she moved away, but met her friend again when coming across another very similar grove in another part of the country (the Philippines). As a class, they’re not particularly friendly – a bit stand-offish, even, though sometimes surreptitiously helpful in practical ways – and often resemble pixies or goblins, never being more than 2ft (50cm) tall. Some have weird skin, shiny or even scaly. These are the ones with odd, double-barrelled names (Mol-Mol, Koddy-Koddy), or mixtures of conventional and near-conventional names (John Gron, Wilston Chang). They are also peculiar in sometimes appearing in groups, although only one of the group will actually interact with the percipient.

Type 3s, animals, are just what it says on their tin, as it were – normal in size and appearance except that they talk, in the percipients’ native tongue, and appear and disappear at will. Hallowell ponders if these creatures are related to, or even the same as, the power animals of American Indian lore, but decides against the idea. One might suggest that whatever in the human mind creates, or calls forth, these animals, is the same: but the manifestations are different. Hallowell notes: “Type 3 QCCs have included dogs, cats, mongooses, frogs, budgerigars, snakes, horses [a popular item], lions, sea lions and, would you believe, a starkly suspicious number of elephants. Apart from the elephants – and possibly horses – I haven’t noticed a preponderance of any other type of creature.” Talk about the elephant in the room!

Hallowell devotes a longish chapter to Gef the Talking Mongoose of the Isle of Man (see FT269:32-39). Gef first manifested himself to the Irving family in early 1932, claiming to have been born in Delhi in 1852. That makes him a most ancient and venerable mongoose; Indian mongooses are reckoned to live about seven years in the wild, and up to 20 years in captivity. This at once suggests he was a



Lulie & Thomas

ABOVE: A pair of imaginary friends drawn by Michael Hallowell’s nephew.

more than grass and a fuzzy object of indeterminate origin. What is purported to be Gef may be a mongoose – or possibly an old slipper.” So where, this deep in, is this leading, à propos ‘imaginary friends’? Hallowell admits the case isn’t strong but, having disposed of other explanations (short of outright, sustained hoax), by a process of elimination, considers it’s the one that fits best: “Firstly, we know that he could not have been a conventional mongoose.” No argument there, squire. “Mongooses simply don’t talk, sing and crack witty one-liners. This in itself makes Gef, at least potentially, a candidate for inclusion in the list of QCC species. Gef was also helpful, offering counsel and practical advice to the Irvings. This is also a

feature of QCCs.” Hallowell concludes: “I believe he fits – albeit awkwardly – better in the [QCC] mold than any other.” If nothing else, it’s certainly a new take on the case.

By far the strangest of ‘imaginary friends’ are what Hallowell dubs the ‘Whackies’ or, more formally ‘Sages’ and ‘Animates’. Early in the book we’ve been warned of something of the kind, as Jonathan Downes, he of the fortean parish, in his foreword confessed how he and his friend shared a sentient car, invisible to all but themselves. Sages appear as exotic adult humans, but usually for some inscrutable reason visible only from the waist up, who supply somewhat platitudinous advice (e.g. “Don’t steal”) to their innocent percipients. One of these Sages called himself Elvis, and looked the later Elvis’s part.

More interesting, or even boggling, are ‘animates’. Hallowell says: “Curiously, animates will appear as everyday household objects that suddenly grow arms and legs (but rarely heads). During my research I’ve come across yoghurt cartons, banana skins, wall-mounted radiators and candle-holders which have suddenly taken on a life of their own and spoken to their undoubtedly startled witnesses.” One of the weirdest was a skeleton that lived inside a radiator. Another odd one was an animated poker.

The book is rich in case histories, all unique, and Hallowell is reluctant to draw too many general conclusions. As is only right, in the circumstances. But he has written a must-read, genuinely fortean book.

See also, Michael J Hallowell, “Jok Zottle and the Invizikids”, FT250:30-35)

Michael J Hallowell, *Invizikids: The Curious Enigma of ‘Imaginary’ Childhood Friends*, Heart of Albion Press 2007.

“I FIND  
TELEVISION  
VERY  
EDUCATING.  
EVERY TIME  
SOMEBODY  
TURNS ON THE  
SET, I GO INTO  
THE OTHER  
ROOM AND  
READ A BOOK.”

*Groucho Marx*

spook with poltergeistish tendencies, but not many polts crack jokes or (according to one report) sing ‘Home Sweet Home’; and Hallowell fairly comprehensively demolishes the polt hypothesis. On the other hand, when Gef appeared, Voirrey, the daughter of the house, was 13 – just the age to stir up a polt. He would claim to have scampered off to neighbours’ houses, and report back to the Irvings on their private doings: Hallowell hints that these reports sometimes embarrassed the Irvings. Shy at first, Gef eventually came forth and close enough to let Mrs Irving stroke his fur, and in due course let Voirrey photograph him. Hallowell comments drily: “The results were hardly spectacular, and generally show nothing



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## Little green man

**PAUL DEVEREUX** shares an unexpected and unnerving encounter in the West of Ireland that he still can't explain...

A strange and disturbing encounter I will never forget occurred one overcast mid-afternoon in the west of Ireland about 20 years ago. My wife Charla and I were driving along a lonely country road during a fieldwork research session for a planned book on worldwide lore relating to beliefs about spirit routes passing through the physical landscape.<sup>1</sup> We were trying to geographically map generations-old accounts of fairy paths we had uncovered in the verbatim folklore records of University College Dublin. We were on our way to the next location on our UCD list in County Mayo to see what we could find in the way of a local memory about a fairy path belief at a particular place there.

We came to a Y-junction in the narrow road. There was no road sign and, unsure of which direction to take, we slowed to a walking pace and proceeded cautiously onto the righthand fork. A level sward of low grass occupied the triangle of land between this fork of the road and the left-hand one. Suddenly, standing on the grass, there was a figure, between two and three feet tall. It was anthropomorphic and fully three-dimensional (as we could clearly determine while we were drifting slowly past). It had sprung into existence out of nowhere, and it caught my wife's and my own transfixed attentions simultaneously. The figure's body comprised a jumble of very dark green tones, as if composed of a tight, dense tangle of foliage, rather like the woodland 100 yards or so beyond the sward of grass. It didn't seem to quite have a face, just a head, with deep-set



eyes peering out of the green tangle. It presented a distinctly forbidding appearance. As we crawled past in our car, the figure started to turn its head in our direction, but then vanished. Charla called out: "Oh shit!" We looked at each other, both of us wide-eyed and thoroughly disconcerted. "You saw *that*?" I asked rhetorically. The whole episode had lasted for only about half a minute or so, but it was unquestionably an actual, if transient, objective observation.

I found this experience to be especially disturbing, not to say inconvenient, as I had been conducting the research on the confident assumption that fairylore was an artefact of cultural conditioning, predicated on a smattering of ultimately explicable experiences had by uncomplicated and superstitious rural people. But I can't explain this event, this 'other-than-human' encounter, to anyone, least of all to myself. Indeed, how 'other' could one get? Had we just witnessed that ancient folkloric motif of the "green

man", assumed to be a fertility symbol? Well, if so, it is no longer a mere motif to me.

I'm ashamed to say that I was so ontologically discombobulated (a fancy way of saying I was scared and confused) that I just put my foot down on the accelerator and drove away from the scene at speed, without staying to conduct further investigation.

The above account is excerpted from my Foreword to the 2019 book *Greening the Paranormal*, edited by Jack

Hunter. I can now add a couple of extra details about the figure. It had a head and shoulders, but neither of us could recall seeing arms or legs. Either it was standing to strict attention, with feet tight together and arms straight by its sides, or it didn't have limbs, standing like some otherworldly bollard. As I state, it seemed distinctly forbidding, at least to me. It still haunts me even these many years later. I now dearly wish I could have that encounter again, this time to behave in a more reasoned, inquisitive way. But, believe me, when you actually have an encounter with something like this you can react quite differently to the way you would normally expect yourself to.

Now, someone like me – a serious researcher, occasional writer on strange topics, and a dedicated fortean, who always tries to be factual – needs to see a little green man like he needs a hole in the head. I was and am acutely aware that it opens me up to ridicule. Should I have kept quiet, trying to forget the

encounter, and trying to pretend to myself that it never happened? To a degree, I did try to do that, but it hasn't worked. But where, in our mainstream society today, can one have a serious discussion about such phenomena, perhaps asking how such entities might be linked to nature? From accounts through time and around the world, many seem to have vegetative associations – certainly what we saw seems to have had. So what happens to them when a woodland or other type of flora they are associated with dies or is destroyed? And, crucially, how can they apparently slip in and out of our space-time reality? What corner of our culture's worldview have we never unfolded?

I mentioned this encounter only in passing in the introduction to the book, but did not give many details, as I was concerned about not blowing my credibility. I guess I have reached an age now where that matters less to me. I know for certain that those who disbelieve me are, ironically, the ones unknowingly trapped in a falsehood, not me. Nevertheless, it is exceedingly frustrating for anyone who has had such an experience to be aware of a truth that could change our modern world simply going begging. The climate has a deepening fever, the world is both drowning and burning, while there is a whole world of 'fairy physics' waiting for us to understand. It sounds utterly crazy, I know (*I really know*), but it is true.

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Fairy Paths & Spirit Roads*, Vega, 2001; republished as *Spirit Roads* by Collins and Brown in 2003.

◆ **PAUL DEVEREUX** is founding co-editor of *Time & Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture*. He has been a regular contributor to *FT* for many years and is the author of many books on fortean and archaeological topics.



## This house is not haunted

**RYAN SHIRLOW** looks back at his personal experience of a house that showed classic signs of a poltergeist haunting.

**G**uy Lyon Playfair is perhaps best known for his research into the Enfield Poltergeist and the resulting book *This House is Haunted*.<sup>1</sup> When I first heard the news of his death in 2018 (see obit FT368:24-25), I was thinking about writing a personal piece comparing the Enfield case with the bizarre phenomena my wife Kate and I experienced when we lived in a small, stone-built 19<sup>th</sup>-century property on the outskirts of Leeds.

Playfair's seminal study provides a very useful summary of the wider phenomenon (in his own words, Enfield offered "almost every feature of traditional poltergeist cases") and a framework by which we can usefully analyse other cases. If my wife and I had been more paranormally-minded we might have considered our house, like the one in Enfield, to be haunted.

Instead we ended up calling the plumber, the electrician, and the police, in that order.

Our first problem, which became apparent shortly after moving into the property, was an eye-wateringly nasty odour in the living room. Mysterious pongs were a minor feature of the Enfield case (an untraceable stench of rotten vegetables apparently), but our problem had a more straightforward cause. The previous owner had allowed his boggle-eyed, flat-faced cat to turn the cellar beneath the living room into one giant litter tray, and the Yorkshire flagstones were covered with a concrete-like layer of damp gravel, excrement and mould. It took months for the smell to finally subside. Interest-



ingly, a mysterious damp substance recovered and analysed at Enfield was found to be cat's piss.

The harsh winter of 2010 was the coldest since 1979 (coincidentally, when the Enfield case was petering out).<sup>2</sup> Our detached, poorly insulated property offered little protection from the extreme weather. Freezing draughts would raise the hairs on the back of your neck, and it was not unusual to have to wear a coat, hat and scarf indoors. According to Playfair, a sudden sensation of cold is one of the most commonly reported features of a haunting. The wind also rattled our cellar door, and could blow it open altogether. I found I was able to replicate this dramatic effect by swinging the kitchen door on the other side of the room, thereby creating a kind of vacuum.

Odd stains appeared on our ceilings, walls and carpet. Some were caused by black mould, which grew vigorously in the damp corners and behind furniture. Others turned out to be the result of a leaking roof slowly discolouring the paintwork. Playfair's book also refers to mysterious pools of water appearing in the lavatory and kitchen at Enfield, and also at a contemporary case in Holloway. One could be forgiven for assuming leaking plumbing or condensa-

tion, which was a major problem every time we used the gas fire or tried to dry our clothes inside.

Most readers will be aware that poltergeist means 'noisy ghost' in German, and that other common symptoms of a polt haunting can include unexplained knocks and raps. In fact, this phenomenon takes the number one slot in Playfair's 'Top Five' of effects reported consistently in cases from around the world.<sup>3</sup> In our house, we eventually traced the problem to a water pipe in the cellar. This exposed pipe ran the length of the cellar ceiling, and was poorly secured. Every time a tap was closed, or the washing machine stopped drawing water, the sudden change in pressure

**LEFT:** the freezing winter of 2010 left large parts of Yorkshire under snow.

**BELOW:** Strange disturbances had prosaic causes. **BOTTOM OF PAGE:** The view across the road to the street light under which the fox 'spirit' appeared.



caused the pipe to jerk, banging against the underside of the living room floor – a phenomenon known as 'water hammer'. Jamming foam insulation around the pipe disconnected its apparent link with the spirit world.

Meanwhile, the cheap taps in the bathroom were prone to turning on in the night by themselves, and more than once the shower came on to dramatic effect whilst we were sleeping snugly in our bed. Taps turning on and off were again a feature of both the Enfield and Holloway cases. The explanation in our case was that our budget bathroom accessories didn't always turn off securely, so a natural increase in neighbourhood water pressure (when at



PHOTOS: RYAN SHIRLOW





PHOTOS: RYAN SHIRLOW

**ABOVE LEFT:** The cellar, the spookiest room in the house: plagued by damp, dodgy plumbing and jury-rigged electrics. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The kitchen: playground for mice.

night, fewer people were drawing on the supply) would cause them to open by themselves.

Over time it became clear that all was not well with the electricity supply either. Lights would dim and flicker, and even expensive energy-saving bulbs would last only a few days before blowing dramatically. Computer equipment was also affected, behaving erratically or dying altogether. Eventually, the electricity company dug up half our road to rectify damage to the underground cables. Technical problems of this kind are mentioned repeatedly in Playfair's book, and lights switching on and off were another factor in the Holloway case. It is noteworthy that the Enfield house had no telephone. Our landline, too, was dead, requiring manual reactivation by a BT engineer. Perhaps the electromagnetic power of communications technology is useful in keeping ghosts at bay.

Many of the other nuisances we encountered in the property boiled down to simple anti-social behaviour on the part of bored local youths. Unseen hands threw footballs, eggs, and flower pots at the house and at our cars parked outside. The police reassured us that there was little to worry about, but the sudden bangs and mocking laughter contributed to a sense of tension and anxiety. Routinely, I would half-wake, convinced that there was a malevolent presence outside the house, or worse, in the bedroom itself.

## The mice were responsible for kitchen objects moving around

Vivid nightmares, even trances, were a key feature of the later stages of the Enfield Case. And poltergeists, in Playfair's words, can "make us do strange things". Perhaps our 'ghost' was acting as an *agent provocateur* for the local mischief-makers?

Unusual animals are a staple of high-strangeness 'window areas' such as Skinwalker Ranch (FT169:44-47, 363:38-41). Sometimes the animals or their behaviour are not so strange in themselves, but can still surprise unsuspecting city dwellers. Mice are often a possible source of problems in poltergeist cases: the scratching noises at Enfield were blamed on a potential rodent infestation. Disappointingly, the investigators never got round to pulling up the floorboards to check. In Leeds, we played host to a small family of mice, which were responsible for kitchen objects moving around when we were out of the room, new metal objects such as tools rusting overnight in their urine, and good food being spilled and spoiled.<sup>4</sup>

I watched one mouse leap through the air and completely vanish. After some head scratch-

ing, I found a tiny gap at the back of a power socket; mice have very flexible skulls, and can squeeze themselves into gaps that are significantly smaller than their heads appear.

Finally, one night we were both awoken by a horrible, guttural *singing* coming from behind a low stone wall across the road, over near the bins. I sneaked onto the landing, determined to catch a glimpse of whatever it was through the transom window above the front door. A few seconds later Kate appeared by my side. "Ryan, what is it?" she asked urgently. I shook my head. For as far as I could tell a small glowing child was floating in the light of the street lamp, stroking her implausibly long hair and producing the most discordant wailing sound I had ever heard. I watched it slack-jawed, as it refused to resolve into anything recognisable, appearing to almost be on fire now in the sulphuric illumination.

And then, very clearly and very obviously, it became a fox. A very large, and very elegant fox, writhing shamelessly on the wall in the street light, doubtless performing for an unseen audience of potential mates. In fact, foxes rifling through the bins and fighting each other might have been guilty of at least some of the other nocturnal disturbances we had experienced.

I often wonder what might have happened if we had been more attuned to the supernatu-

ral, more willing to ascribe our experiences to a resident spirit. According to Playfair, events can escalate in the presence of those who believe. Writing in 2007 for the 'Afterthoughts' section of the reissued edition of *This House is Haunted*, Playfair stated that he did not believe that poltergeists were the spirits of the dead, but instead an entirely natural phenomenon somehow drawing energy from susceptible individuals, especially during periods of stress or disturbance. In his advice on what to do if confronted by a poltergeist, he stresses that the phenomenon feeds on tension, anxiety, and, more than anything, *attention*.

Perhaps, in the end, we exorcised our haunting with sheer indifference.

### NOTES

**1** Guy Lyon Playfair, *This House is Haunted: The Investigation into the Enfield Poltergeist*, 1980, reissued 2011.

**2** [www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/summaries/2010/winter](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/summaries/2010/winter)

**3** Other, more extreme categories of phenomena in Playfair's list include: objects being thrown around, chairs and tables overturning, objects catching fire, and strange (human) behaviour.

**4** The spoiling of food is also a common complaint in witchcraft cases.

◆ RYAN SHIRLOW is a musician and occasional writer, currently working undercover as a civil servant and father of two.



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## Visions of Angels

**Bob Rickard** explores a study of angels, and finds links with mediæval alchemy, Tibetan Buddhism, fairies and shamanic traditions of the axis mundi

### Angels

#### A Visible and Invisible History

Peter Stanford

Hodder & Stoughton Hb 2019, Pb October 2020

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With one in 10 people owning up to a belief in the existence of angels – in a 2016 poll – and one in three in a personal “guardian” angel, author Peter Stanford says the result is better than a belief in God. He is up-front about his angel-filled Catholic upbringing and education, with all the attendant theological baggage that is imposed upon young minds.

He also confesses that he had never seriously thought about the subject until he was writing

a biography of a supermodel who married into the super-rich Astor family. Bronwen Pugh said that, away from the public spotlight, she had many ecstatic experiences “of God’s overwhelming love”. Just days after the birth of her daughter in 1961, she told Stanford, she was lying in bed and “suddenly

saw these angels. They were tiny and going up and down, as if on a ladder. They were in brilliant colours and they were looking at me and smiling a wonderfully merciful smile.”

Stanford pressed her for more details: yes, she was exhausted from the birth, but she was not on heavy medication, nor dreaming.

“I was awake,” Pugh assured him, “and that is what I saw.

They were in the fireplace in my room.”

The incident kindled an interest in the personal experience of angels, especially the “guardians”, and this book is filled with many interviews and accounts from those who claim to have had direct experience of these numinous entities ranging from subjective impressions to apparently “real” manifestations.

The great variety of these – from the descriptions of the entities, the circumstances of the experience, the interpretations of the encounter, and the different “types” of percipient – will certainly interest fortians, folklorists and psychologists... indeed anyone who studies “vis-

ionary” experiences, from UFOs and ghosts to angelic beings.

As you might expect, Stanford has a lot of ground to cover, beginning with the divergent theological literature of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and their shared cultural history in antiquity. Angels figure ubiqu-

itously in religious art, in which they seem perfectly designed to convey divine will. On the other hand, they are equally prolific in the cultural undercurrent of the Western magical traditions, marshalled as a divine army against the millennial menace of “fallen” Satan and his dark horde.

While the sanctified armies of both Islam and the Crusaders claimed to have God and his angels on their side, the real

*“The angels were tiny and going up and down, as if on a ladder. They were in brilliant colours”*

ideological and spiritual conflict that infested Western historical and cultural development was far more insidious. Superficially, we think of invoking angelic names in popular charms and anti-curses, but the combat had its serious and frightening aspects, such as “possession” and the terrible centuries of murdering witches, apostates and heretics.

The early Middle Ages also gave rise to the curious conjunction of “angelology”, in which the mysteries of alchemy – to which some of the greatest pioneers of early chemistry and physics were attracted – were sought in the “language” of angels, which involved maths, numerology and esoteric symbolism.

In a way, the history of the study of angels provides a useful framework on which to hang the whole of both popular and scholarly catechism in all its complexity and schisms. Stanford writes clearly so that any reader, regardless of specialist knowledge, can benefit from his interesting and wide-ranging information. There are many obscure aspects of the biblical angels; probably too many for Stanford to touch upon.

To catch some of the many important related topics, an alphabet of short articles is scattered through the book, which I feel could have been expanded by multiple entries for each letter. For example, while he discusses the four-headed four-winged “cherubim” that ac-

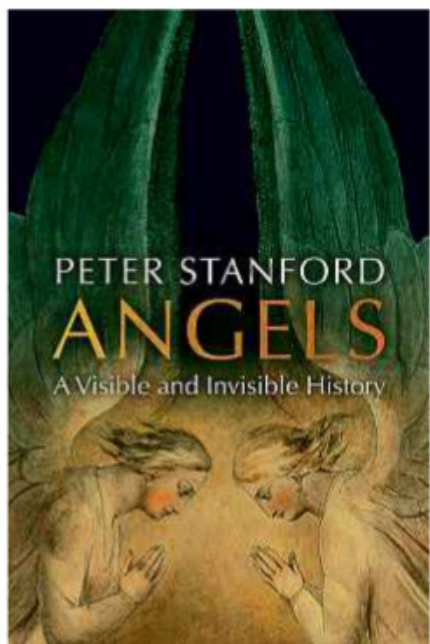
companied the strange “chariot” with “wheels within wheels” seen by Ezekiel in a vision, he notes that there still exists today a Judaic cult devoted to what is called “throne mysticism”, which focuses on experiencing spiritual ascension to the heart of Heaven.

There is an interesting contrast here. According to the Book of Enoch, when 200 angels rebelled to fornicate with the “daughters of men”, God dispatched three mighty angels to arrest them and cast them into a fiery abyss “forever”. In the Tibetan tradition the demons opposing the proselytisation of Buddhism were similarly subjugated, but then converted into angel-like beings committed to protect the dharma teachings.

Then, I wonder if you will think, as I did on reading the opening account of Bronwen Pugh’s vision of tiny angels in her fireplace, how similar it is to so many descriptions of fairies, now being gathered by the likes of Simon Young. Obviously, as a committed Christian, she interpreted them as angels. That they were going “up and down” was very likely an echo of the story of Jacob’s ladder, on which angels travelled between Heaven and Earth. This theme has been shown by some anthropologists to have some correspondence with the shamanic traditions of the axis mundi – the central link between Earth and the celestial regions – which also represents the “path” the shaman must travel.

In this sense, the study of angels is just one aspect of the intermediation between Man and the numinous Divine. For now, Peter Stanford’s book offers an excellent briefing on the angelic form of it.

★★★★





# Curiouser and curiouser

Dodo bones and jade dildos – a pictorial collection of the truly weird and wonderful

## The Unnatural History Museum

Viktor Wynd

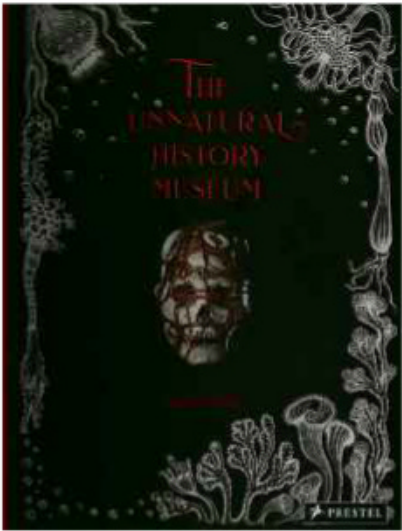
Prestel 2020

Hb, 200pp, £35, illus, ind, ISBN 9783791385198

Described by John Waters as a “sick orchid”, Viktor Wynd is celebrated for his Hackney museum, the Viktor Wynd Cabinet of Curiosities, Fine Art and UnNatural History, the basis for his 2014 book *Viktor Wynd’s Cabinet of Wonders*. That was about the whole collection, and also covered several collections by other people, while this more personal new book looks at some individual objects together with anecdotes and general free-associations.

Wynd has no truck with modern museums – dreary places of “education” and ideology – and having made that defiantly clear, we plunge into a magnificent freakshow arranged into chapters such as Monsters and Mythical Beasts, Confessions of a Mass-Murdering Aurelian (“butterfly collector” to you) and On the Joy of Penises.

Objects include miniature dogs (fruits of the Victorian practice of stuffing newborn or even foetal puppies and presenting them as miniatures of their breed), a shrunken head and a Mexican magic soap packet, together with a dodo bone, a set of beads for measuring testicle size, and a “finger-axe” from Papua, with which grieving widows were expected to chop off their fingers. As Wynd explains, this has become less popular with modern Papuan women. More modest items include an ageing baked potato, some creepy Macdonald’s Happy Meal Toys and a pair of Wynd’s underpants. Wynd’s publishers vetoed a “lurid” copulation painting on the



bizarre grounds of making the book family-friendly, but this is already a thoroughly lost cause, with pickled prostitutes’ vaginas, jade dildos (and a story about a customer who wanted to hire one well-used), and a generously shared fantasy of having one’s bottom beaten with one’s head down a lavatory.

This is a relatively knockabout and wacky companion to the more serious earlier book, and they both feature Oskar Proctor’s superb photography. A note might have been useful, tucked away and not spoiling anyone’s fun, to say



what some of the objects really are, notably the cyclops skull, giant’s leg bone and Irish fairy. Also missing (unacquired) is a cigarette holder made from a tiger’s penis bone – “something that even by my admittedly lax standards I consider rather louche”.

Phil Baker

★ ★ ★

## Bedlam

London’s Hospital for the Mad

Paul Chambers

The History Press 2019

Pb, 320pp, £10.99, bib, refs, ind, ISBN 9780750991483

*Bedlam* is a fresh depiction of the oldest, and arguably most famous, lunatic asylum in Britain. Culturally, Bedlam’s reputation as a site of significant historical abuse of those defined as mad has prevailed, and as Paul Chambers admits, continues “to conjure up visions of chaos, disorder and abuse”.

This well-researched work of popular non-fiction does not set out to compete with the vast array of scholarly textbooks on the asylum, and the wider history of madness in general. Rather, it traces the story of Bedlam from its inception in 1247 to the present day, and attempts to bring out the intricacies that reveal centuries of mismanagement, corruption and prejudice.

Bedlam, or Bethlem Hospital, as it began, originally came into being as a charitable site of care for sick paupers under a religious order, the Prior of St Mary of Bethlehem, in the 13th century. Situated in London, the institution soon began to accept cases of mental affliction, and became known as the City’s only mental hospital.

Fascination with the bizarre and unusual drew people to Bedlam, and it became a tourist attraction for those willing to pay a penny to pass through its gates. “Bedlam”, originally “Bedelem”, was the nickname by which Londoners referred to the hospital by the 1380s, and came to denote anything chaotic.

The book tracks Bedlam’s fortunes by focusing on the management, and mismanagement, of the institution. It was clear that what began as a site of treatment transformed into a financially corrupt organisation with little regard for its patients.

For instance, by the late 18th century, when enlightened practices and treatment were becoming increasingly common, Bedlam was still allowing tourists to visit, and by 1763 the income generated by this peaked at £450 annually (£60,000 today).

By the early 19th century, as public lunatic asylum construction became widespread, the abuses and lack of patient welfare came to light through various investigations, including the pivotal 1815 Select Committee, and a wave of reform swept through the madhouses of old, including Bedlam.

A new, therapeutic and financially sound era began at the Hospital, aided by the relocation to St George’s Fields (today the Imperial War Museum), outside the City of London, in August 1815. Patients were provided with tasks to keep them usefully employed, amusements and leisure facilities, and ultimately treated with humanity.

Chambers gets to the truth behind Bedlam, dispelling some of the popular misconceptions that have come to dominate its murky reputation. For example, the prevailing view that “inconvenient” people, mostly

women, were incarcerated at the bequest of relatives, even if they were not mad, is rebuffed: “very few sane people ended up as patients”.

While Chambers gives a great insight into the institution, what this book lacks is a sense of

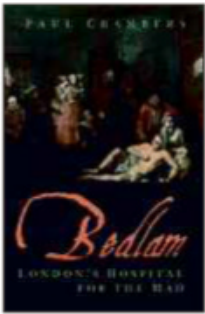
what it was like to be a patient in Bedlam throughout its eight centuries of operation. Although he does detail some of the treatments implemented, for instance “vomits, purges, opiates, bleeding and cold baths”, he does so from the perspective of the men who prescribed and actioned them, rather than those who felt and experienced them. Overwhelmingly, the focus throughout is on the politics surrounding the institution’s management, and its famous doctors.

This book is a great starting point for anyone wishing to delve into the history of Britain’s oldest asylum. As well as confirming the darker sides of the hospital, Chambers addresses some of the myths surrounding Bedlam, particularly those emphasised in horror movies and wider popular culture.

In summary, a worthwhile read for those interested in historical sites of madness.

Cara Dobbing

★ ★ ★







## The Imposteress Rabbit Breeder

Mary Toft and Eighteenth-Century England

Karen Harvey

Oxford University Press 2020

Hb, 211 pp, £16.99, illus, notes, bib, ind, ISBN 9780198734888

In October 1726 the British public's imagination was seized by news of a remarkable event: a field labourer from Surrey, Mary Toft, claimed to have given birth to rabbits [FT57:26]. A local doctor, John Howard, attested to events and as word spread, more medical men rushed to investigate. Soon, Toft had been brought to London, which led to a rise in both the public appetite for the story and the eminence of the investigating medics.

By December, however, the jig was up: Toft confessed to concealing animal parts upon her person and she was removed from her (paid for) accommodation in Leicester Fields

to the Westminster House of Correction. She suffered hard toil and poor health, but she never actually stood trial for any offence and was released without charge in April 1727. Toft returned to Surrey but she retained her ignominy: "Imposteress Rabbit Breeder" was entered alongside her name in the Godalming parish register on her death in 1763.

Karen Harvey's examination of the Mary Toft case – once the preserve of medical historians aiming to expose the foolish foibles of their professional predecessors – forensically zeroes in on the nuts and bolts of the story, while also placing it in a broader social and cultural context. For Harvey, Toft's experiences expose wider fault lines across 18th-century society, rather than just the ignorance of contemporary doctors. As she points out, the medical men rushing to Toft's side were not necessarily fools being taken in by an elaborate hoax, but as much seekers of rational evidence to prove remarkable events. With Toft claiming that it was the sight of a rabbit while labouring in the field that induced her births, the haste of some medical men to investigate

her case – and prove the theory of "maternal impression" – can be more adequately understood.

A social as opposed to a medical reading of rabbits is one of the most interesting interpretations offered by Harvey. The growing control of landowners over common ground included that of rabbit warrens. Tensions over land use in Godalming developed into protests and trespasses in the months leading up to Toft's "births". With that in mind, Harvey asks, is there any political symbolism in Mary's fixation on rabbits, which were frequently seen as signs of wealth? Was the hoax in some way an act of opposition to the landed elite of Godalming? In her telling of events, Harvey stresses Toft's

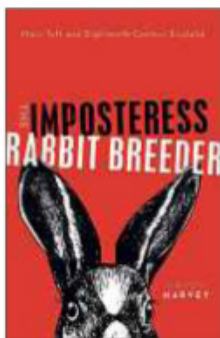
position as a powerless woman: one buffeted as much by the female-dominated social spheres of birthing as the male physicians examining her body in London. For her, if anyone is the mastermind behind the hoax it's Mary's mother-in-law.

While it is extremely detailed on the local, social and medical contexts behind Mary Toft's case, more detail concerning other accounts of seemingly anomalous behaviour might have provided further insight. While both are alluded to, I did wonder if there was more to be learned from a more thorough comparison between Toft and those other notable anomalous events from the 18th century (later exposed as hoaxes), the Cock Lane Ghost and the Bottle Conjurer. Particularly as, like Toft, both filled copious column inches in contemporary newspapers. Or indeed, was Toft battling for space with other oddities, now lesser known?

Such cavils aside, Harvey's account of Mary Toft's "births" and their social, medical and cultural contexts, is an excellent demonstration of modern historical scholarship: scrupulously researched from a wide variety of sources, but empathetic in its delivery and tone. It is also an exemplary model for what can be achieved when seemingly anomalous events are examined by way of a deeper dive into their wider social and cultural contexts.

Ross MacFarlane

★★★★



## The Technical Delusion

Electronics, Power, Insanity

Jeffrey Sconce

Duke University Press 2019

Pb, 433pp, \$30.95, illus, ind, ISBN 978147800165

Who are the tinfoil hat brigade these days? The term is used disparagingly for the growing number of self-identified "targeted individuals" (TIs) afflicted by electronic surveillance, chronic fatigue, mysterious brain implants or malevolent "gangstalking". But does it also apply to the diplomats at the US Embassy in Cuba who believe themselves assailed by pulsed-frequency signals or Russian psychotronic weaponry? Or fashion-forward consumers of RF-blocking bags and designer clothing with lined pockets and hoods to reflect cellphone and microwave radiation? Where do techno-anxieties end and paranoid delusions begin?

As Jeffrey Sconce shows in compelling detail, the history of technological delusions is a shadow history of technology itself. In 1810 the Bedlam inmate James Tilly Matthews drew precise blueprints of the Air Loom, a machine he believed was tormenting him with the cutting-edge technology of its day: mesmerism, voltaic pile batteries and newly-discovered gases. By the end of the 19th century psychiatrists were regularly encountering patients who claimed their thoughts were being beamed around the world via telegraph, or were receiving messages via an invisible telephone. In 1894 the playwright August Strindberg, while being treated for nervous illness, believed he was being persecuted by an electric "accumulator" device concealed under his bed.

In 1919 Freud's associate Victor Tausk coined the term "influencing machine" to describe beliefs of this kind, which he saw as a novel expression of schizophrenia. For patients experiencing strange physical and mental symptoms, particularly ones that involved a loss of control over their own thoughts and bodies, the influencing machine provided a rational explanation. Such devices were fantastical

extensions of the hi-tech of their day, controlled by malign and invisible puppet-masters, often the patient's psychiatrist.

Sconce, a professor of media studies, has immersed himself in psychiatric history and brings the two fields together in an account that is densely theorised and rich in fascinating case studies. He builds on Tausk's ideas, together with Freud's observation in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) that humans have become "a type of Prosthetic God", our biological nervous systems extending out into a web of electric signals and vibrations that span the globe and engender new forms of shared consciousness that approach telepathy.

"In future histories of our cybernetic penetration," Sconce suggests, "the iPhone may well be seen as the key transitional technology in this march towards compulsory prosthesis." Two hundred years ago, James Tilly Matthews was convinced that a magnet had been implanted in his brain by the operators of the Air Loom, and today the brain-implanted microchip is among the future wonders envisaged by Elon Musk. Smartphones are

still too large to physically implant but they have brought us all within touching distance of these dreams and nightmares, plugging us into a buzzing electronic ether that transmits our thoughts around

the world while making us visible to armies of shadowy operators.

Classic theories of schizophrenia argue that influencing machines and technical delusions are essentially a form of set-dressing in which psychotic symptoms can manifest: some patients will perceive themselves as pawns in a religious struggle between God the Devil; others will be convinced that a brain implant is making their thoughts audible to the CIA. Sconce's provocative conclusion is that they have a deeper significance, pointing towards a shift in the human condition. Electronic technology is blurring the boundaries between the self and the outside world, humanity and machine. The tinfoil hat is no longer the preserve of a mentally disturbed minority, but the must-have designer accessory of the future.

Mike Jay

★★★★





# Magic and mythic women

A new history of paganism and magic debunks some myths, while tales are told of strong women from the world's mythology

## Miracles of Our Own Making

A History of Paganism

Liz Williams

Reaktion Books 2020

Hb, 350pp, £15.95, refs, bib, ind, ISBN 9781789142211

Not the entire history, but a witty and clear-sighted account of paganism and magic in Britain over the past 2,000 years. Where evidence is lacking, Liz Williams doesn't speculate. In fact, she sets out to "debunk some of the prevailing myths".

The Druids' oral culture, acquired through decades of study, did not survive: about all we know about them is that they did not wear white robes or build Stonehenge. The Saxons and Vikings worshipped many gods, but written accounts are later and unreliable. However, "Edicts were passed against magic, and you do not bother passing a law against something unless it actually exists and presents a problem." There is no evidence for an "Old Religion" that survived from those times until today, though "people still sought to heal and harm," and obtain money, power and love.

In the Middle Ages, witches – like heretics, Templars and Jews – were accused of orgies, cannibalism and worse. The European persecutions of 1450-1650 resulted in many deaths, though not the nine million often claimed. But "Britain got off relatively lightly". In 1712, in England's last witch trial, a woman was accused of conversing with the Devil and flying. "There is no law against flying," opined the judge, and overturned her conviction. Educated Renaissance men studied alchemy and the Hermetic tradition, the Tarot and astrology, referring to "grimoires" based on magical works from the Egyptian and Ancient Greek world. They taught invisibility, treasure-finding and the evocation of

demons: most effective in bright moonlight or a thunderstorm. The 18th century brought the Enlightenment, and a revival of home-grown, Nature-loving Druidry – no more borrowing culture from Classical Greece. Georgian gentlemen also organised the magical world into mason-like societies which tended to split and reform.

Eliphas Lévi (b. 1810) stated that "human willpower alone has the power to change reality – this is a central tenet of current magic", says Williams. Lévi influenced Aleister Crowley who, with Helena Blavatsky, synthesised the New Age as we know it today (and which still has a *fin de siècle* whiff about it). Societies formed and divided, now with a political element and feminist strand. Writer Edith Nesbit was among those present – no wonder her children's books feature Atlantis, Ancient Egypt and the Phoenix.

Finally, Spiritualism, the Celtic Twilight, modern magic since the war, and the contemporary scene. Looking for a group to join? Williams gives sensible advice. Altogether this is an informative and entertaining round-up. She reports that people still come into her Glastonbury shop in search of spells for love and success.

Lucy R Fisher

★ ★ ★

## Warriors, Witches, Women

Mythology's Fiercest Females

Kate Hodges

White Lion Publishing 2020

Hb, 223pp, £18.99, illus, ISBN 9781781319260

Myths, legends and fairy tales have long been a source of inspiration for feminist writing, Angela Carter being a notable

example. This book introduces 50 notable female mythological women with a brief biography, a folk tale or two and a paragraph on their relevance to popular culture. The characters are divided into five sections; Witches, Warriors, Bringers of Misfortune, Elemental Spirits and Munificent Spirits.

Hodges casts her net wide. Her broad sweep through world mythology takes in Classical Greece and Rome, Scandinavia, North and South America, the Middle East, India, China, Japan and Eastern Europe. Artemis and Hecate sit alongside Mexico's La Llorona, the Hebrew Lilith and the Sami Madderakka. All the stories are beautifully told. As each character gets three pages, the folk tales are brief and I would have enjoyed more of them. There is a list of further reading for those who would like to delve a little deeper into these fascinating stories.

The commentary on each character's relevance to popular culture is the weakest part of the book. Lilith has long been a feminist heroine, but I couldn't see a clear connection between Futakuchi-onna, a Japanese

ghost monster with a second mouth in the back of her head, and today's Body Positive movement. References to *Game of Thrones* and pop stars such as Azealia Banks will date the book quickly. But it's mostly delightful, and made even better by Harriet Lee-Merrion's simple and engaging illustrations. I was pleased to revisit tales I've loved since childhood and to be introduced to many new and inspiring females. There is much to like about this book; and it would make the perfect gift for a teenage feminist.

Paula Dempsey

★ ★ ★ ★

## The A-Z of the Knights Templar

A Guide to their History and Legacy

Gordon Napier

The History Press 2020

Pb, 447pp, £10.99, notes, bib, ISBN 9780750993890

The cultural ubiquity of the Knights Templar is remarkable and never fails to provide the popular media with a source of speculative fodder. Whether it's the quasi-mystical speculations of Graham Hancock's *The Sign and the Seal* or literary conspiracy with Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, not to mention the mysterious Rennes-le-Château, those secretive monks are everywhere! Let's not forget that they were a real religious order and a significant power broker during the Crusades (1098-1254).

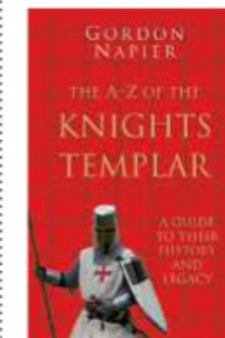
Swearing allegiance to the Patriarch of Jerusalem following the success of the First Crusade, the Templars became a formidable monastic

and military order. As the Holy Land expanded under their tenancy, property and land acquisition followed and their role as a police force for pilgrims became secondary to their military domination of the area. Military reversals at the hand of Saladin in 1187 and the loss of Jerusalem brought the order under papal suspicion, and its failure to recapture the city by the Seventh Crusade (1247-1254) sealed their fate. With accusations of treachery and heresy levelled against them, Pope Clement V reluctantly sought the dissolution of the order in 1312. The monks were arrested and tortured and their last Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, burned alive in 1314.

Now in its third imprint this A-Z is an exhaustive compendium of all things Knights Templar. Entries covering key personalities, political events and areas of geographical significance are organised alphabetically and internally indexed for ease of cross-reference. Scholarly and readable with pertinent chronological tables, notes and a bibliography, the A-Z is a formidable research tool.

Chris Hill

★ ★ ★ ★ ★





# THE HAUNTED GENERATION

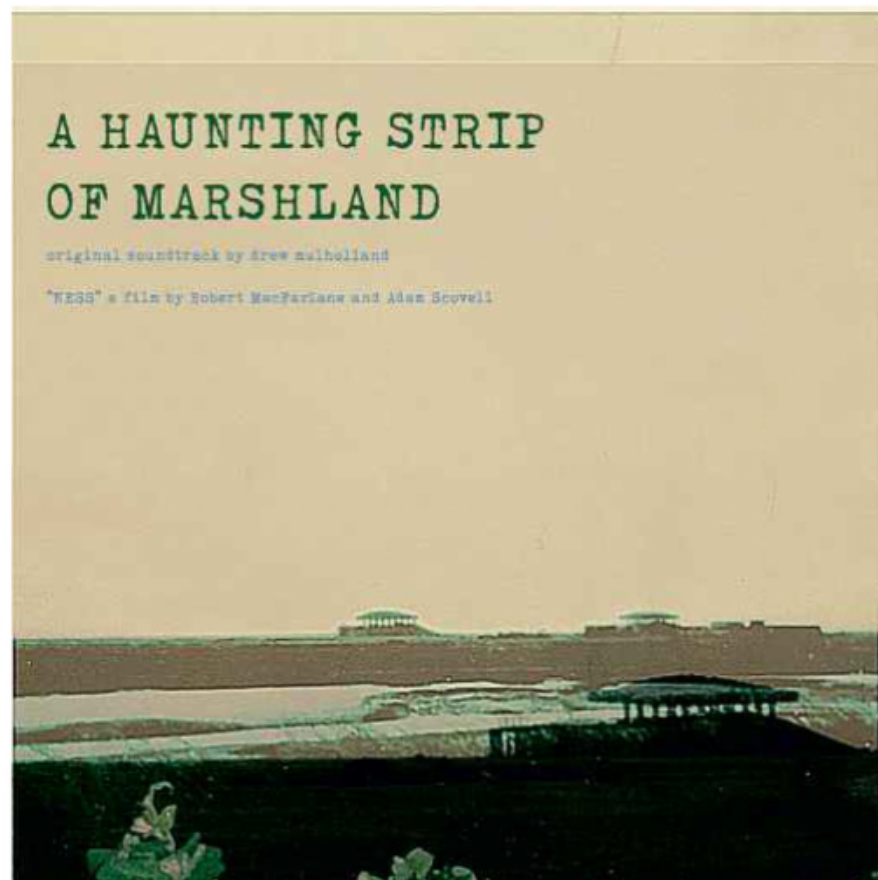
BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE  
PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY...

"I think it's always a time of hope, and new growth," says Jon Brooks, discussing his new album *How to Get to Spring*, a beautifully melodic and meditative evocation of his favourite season. "So this album is about that. It's offering a kind of quiet hope, really."

During the ongoing coronavirus lockdown, many of us have found ourselves pining for our usual connections with the natural world, and landscapes that both soothe and exhilarate. *How to Get to Spring* offers blissful musical respite, inspired by Jon's walks around the remote trails of his native Peak District and a life-affirming journey to the Isle of Skye. "I really just switch myself off, and open myself to what's going on around me," he says. "And I think that puts you into a different mental state. That's where I get a lot of inspiration from, and certain things can bubble to the surface..."

The album is a gentle, elegant musical journey; deliberately structured to drift gracefully from the hard ground and clear skies of January to the pink blossom and bone-thawing sunshine of early May. Stately piano compositions like 'Dreaming and Further Still' are swathed in reassuring breaths of woozy electronica, and 'Neist Point' adds softly strummed guitars and a subtle Celtic influence, appropriate for a piece inspired by this remote Hebridean outpost. "I just thought the atmosphere around it was amazing," says Jon. "You look out to sea, and... that's pretty much all you can see. Just water. You feel really small in that place."

The album is the latest of Jon's solo recordings to be released by Clay Pipe Music, and the label is also reissuing a vinyl edition of his haunting 2012 album, *Shapwick* (see FT354:34). This latter collection – influenced



by a night-time motorway detour through the titular Somerset village – melds elegiac piano with the sounds of wistful music boxes, vintage radiophonica and field recordings, and is utterly mesmeric.

Meanwhile, Jon's extensive recordings as The Advisory Circle are available from Ghost Box Records.

Taking similar inspiration from evocative landscapes is an exciting quartet comprising best-selling writer Robert Macfarlane, artist Stanley Donwood, film-maker Adam Scovell and musician Drew Mulholland. Macfarlane and Donwood are the men behind *Ness* (Hamish Hamilton, 2019), a beautiful, delicately-illustrated prose poem set amidst the eerie topography of Orford Ness, the shingle-

covered shard that clings to the Suffolk coastline.

Commandeered by the MOD as a secret testing site throughout both world wars and the ensuing Cold War, this curious outpost also plays host to the 'Black Beacon', an experimental 1930s radio tower, and in more recent years has been protected by the National Trust as a fragile nature reserve. It's perhaps no surprise that such a psychogeographical goldmine has triggered a chain reaction of artistic responses. Hot on the heels of *Ness*'s publication came Adam Scovell's similarly-titled film adaptation (visit celluloidwickerman.com), setting Macfarlane's prose to artfully shot and hugely atmospheric 8mm footage, its grainy glimpses of abandoned military facilities and windswept beaches themselves feeling like flickering transmissions, echoing through the decades. And Drew Mulholland's soundtrack to the film, entitled *A Haunting Strip of Marshland*, is scheduled for release by the Castles in Space label in June. Its throbbing, electronic soundscapes effortlessly evoke his lifelong love of the BBC

Radiophonic Workshop, and Mulholland is also a grand master of manipulated field recordings: parts of the album were even recorded on cassette tapes dotted with the remains of ground-up lichen, native to the Ness.

And, for further bucolic delight, I recommend *Copsford*, a new album by RB Russell. Released to celebrate the 100th anniversary of journalist Walter JC Murray's rejection of modernity, and the resulting year that he spent living in a rundown house in the Sussex countryside, it's a minimalist but tunefully tender collection of atmospheric instrumental pieces. Murray's written account of his year of isolation, also titled *Copsford*, was published in 1948, and bespoke hardback editions are available from Russell's own Tartarus Press publishing house. The album, meanwhile, can be downloaded from [rbrussell.bandcamp.com](http://rbrussell.bandcamp.com).

Kudos also to Brighton synth queen Hattie Cooke, whose album *The Sleepers* has previously graced these pages (FT387:69). Hattie has curated the rather wonderful *Help Musicians Compilation*, a collection of original material on her newly forged Patch Bae Records label. Intended to raise funds, via the Help Musicians UK charity, for artists whose livelihoods have been threatened by the coronavirus lockdown, the album is a splendid miscellany of atmospheric electronica and synth-pop from the likes of Polypores, Repeated Viewing and Rupert Lally. Head to [patchbaerecords.bandcamp.com](http://patchbaerecords.bandcamp.com).

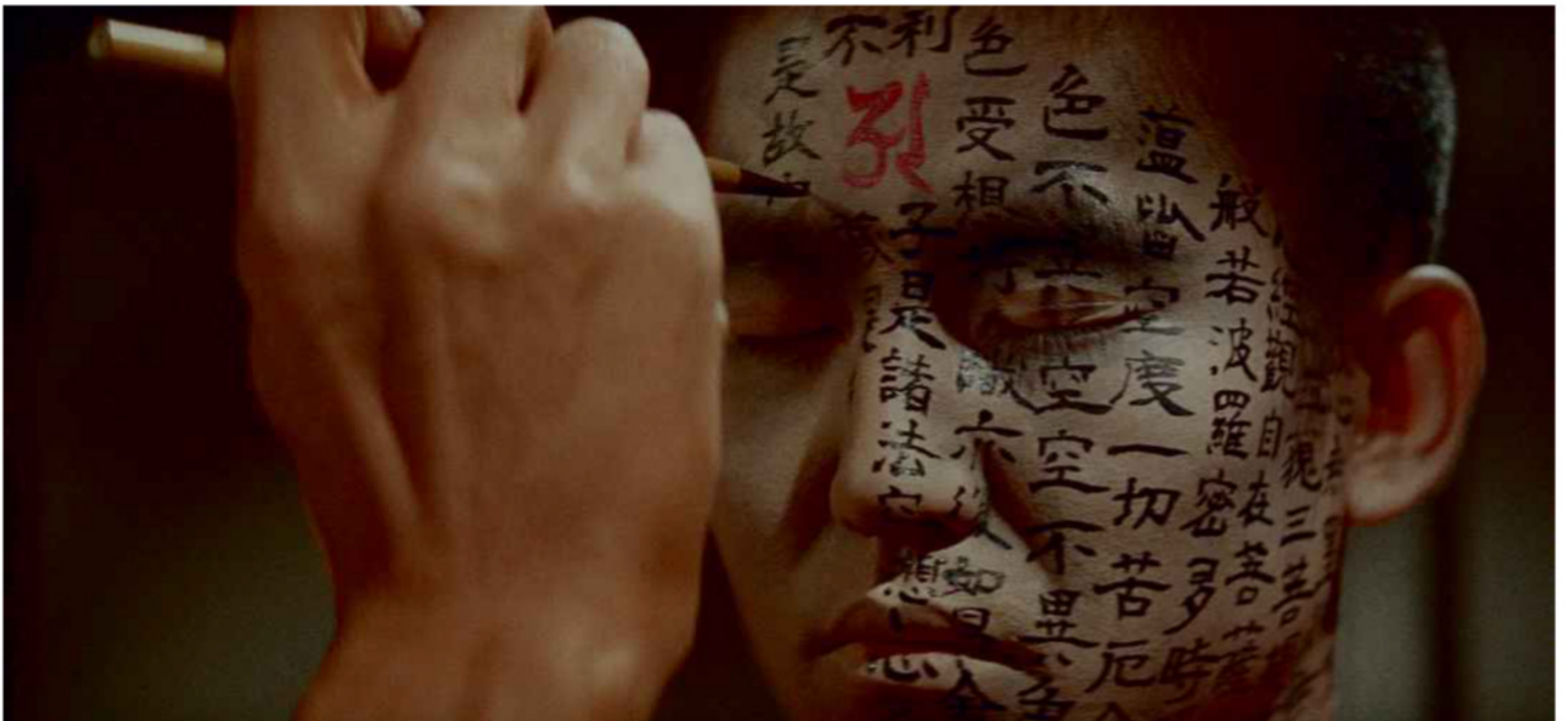
Visit the Haunted Generation website at [www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk](http://www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk), send details of new releases, or memories of the original "haunted" era to [hauntedgeneration@gmail.com](mailto:hauntedgeneration@gmail.com), or find me on Twitter... @bob\_fischer



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## Stories of strange things

With cinemas closed, audiences will have to content themselves with streaming and home entertainment fare, including a welcome HD release for a ghostly Japanese classic



### Kwaidan

Dir Masaki Kobayashi, Japan 1964  
Eureka, £25.99 (Ltd edition Blu-ray)

Masaki Kobayashi's 1964 ghostly anthology, based on Lafcadio Hearn's collections of Japanese folk tales, isn't the zippiest of films, and at just over three hours for four tales, stories do risk outstaying their welcome. It is the first story, 'The Black Hair', which feels the baggiest, though its demonic long black tresses have been incredibly influential. Things pick up with the icy second story, 'The Woman of the Snow.' Possibly the most visually enthralling, with a magnificent snowscape bordered by a backdrop of sky that looks to be filled with eyes, it is also the most emotionally engaging, as a woodcutter learns the heartbreaking cost of breaking a promise.

Ironically, it is the longest segment, 'Hoichi the Earless', which is the most engaging – a slow but powerful gem which follows a blind musician as he is called upon by a ghostly regiment

*Its demonic black tresses have been incredibly influential*

to sing to them the tale of their demise. Initially unclear, the title gains its meaning in a brutal scene which has lost none of its shocking power. Disappointingly, the final tale, 'In a Cup of Tea', is a step down, a slight MR James-esque tale of a haunting which is neither narratively engaging nor emotionally developed.

Despite the underwhelming bookends, *Kwaidan* is more hit than miss (not to be sniffed at when it comes to horror anthologies). Even in the lesser tales, the gorgeous studio sets, energetic direction and delightful performances mean that it can sit happily alongside Bava's *Black Sabbath* as a prime example of 1960s anthology horror.

Martin Parsons



### Reborn

Dir Julian Richards, US 2018  
Lightbulb, £7.99 (DVD) + digital

*Reborn* is a fairly standard low-budget modern horror film which is made interesting by its fascination with Hollywood and the process of film-making. The director clues us into this in the opening sequence, in which a dead body is brought back to life by a spark of electricity during a storm, recalling the daddy of all horror films, *Frankenstein*. The point is reinforced in one of the last scenes, which anyone who has seen *Carrie* will recognise instantly.

The body in question is that of a stillborn baby girl who is taken home and cared for, after a fashion, by creepy morgue attendant Ken (Chaz Bono), who witnessed the resurrection. Sixteen years later, the girl Tess (Kayleigh Gilbert) breaks free from Ken's prison using her ability to lethally manipulate electricity and wanders off into LA to find her mother, dogged by Detective Fox (Michael

Paré) who is investigating Ken's death. Tess's mother happens to be fading movie actress Lena (Barbara Crampton), currently prepping for a make-or-break audition for a new film by veteran director Peter Bogdanovich.

The plot is largely immaterial, the film being little more than a series of set piece deaths held together by a flimsy story about a mother-daughter relationship. Ordinarily, it wouldn't be worth your time – but look at that cast again. These are some genre legends we're talking about: Crampton, the beautiful scream queen, Paré, the beefy king of direct-to-video thrillers. On top of that, there's Rae Dawn Chong, who looked like becoming a major star in the 1980s, and Monte Markham, who has been in just about every US TV series you can think of since the 1960s. There's even a part for Chaz Bono, son of none other than Cher.

Chong plays Lena's agent, featuring in a lot of scenes about casting, rehearsals, and read-throughs which reveal a passion on the director's part for the nuts





and bolts of making pictures. Not only that, but he is also in love with Hollywood itself, going by the beautiful and reverential shot of the Hollywood sign early in the movie; the presence of the actual Peter Bogdanovich in a cameo pushes *Reborn* pretty close to being a meta film.

Director Richards has been in the directing game for well over 20 years and his CV includes some pretty well regarded horror films, particularly *Darklands* and *The Last Horror Film*, so he clearly knows the genre inside out. On this occasion, though, the horror element is secondary, and it's why the film doesn't really work as an example of that genre. That's not to say there aren't two or three decent set pieces, but the atmosphere is flat, the acting is variable and there's nothing startling put in front of the camera. It is worth seeing, though, for the interesting and rather endearing way Richards expresses his love for horror films, and for film-making in general.

Daniel King



## The Wretched

Dir Brett Pierce, Drew T Pierce, US 2019

On digital platforms

Much like their big-budget counterparts, independent horror films are a mixed bag of the refreshing and the regurgitated. Often inhabited by unbearably asinine characters and suffering from an overload of jump scares solely for the sake of jump scares, these formulaic flicks are the bane of many a horror fan's existence.

Thankfully, with *The Wretched* – in which a troubled young boy has to contend with supernatural terrors in his dad's neighbourhood – we get a fairly enjoyable horror movie where the scares are largely earned and the effects are well-executed and gory. This lends the film a certain degree of suspense and some undeniable appeal as an entertaining, blood-soaked treat – at least on the surface level.

Unfortunately, once one scratches that surface, *The Wretched* struggles with the characterisation of its

protagonists in particular. While they are not quite as vapid as so many other formulaic horror movie inhabitants, it's difficult to thoroughly invest in what feel like rough drafts rather than fully realised and truly relatable characters.

Similarly, while the scenes and locations involving the antagonist have a genuinely eerie feel, the surrounding world is overwhelmingly derivative of settings and scenarios that bring a wide array of horror classics to mind. It's hard not to feel that everything from the various supporting characters to whole set piece sequences serve no purpose other than to tick a box of must-have horror tropes.

As a contemporary independent horror, *The Wretched* maintains a good momentum in terms of mystery and scares, just as the special effects and supernatural elements are executed with some real panache. But aside from the filmmakers' evident knack for effective horror filmmaking, the film remains formulaic and forgettable to a fault.

Leyla Mikkelsen



## Bliss

Dir Joe Begos, US 2019  
Eureka, £11.99 (Blu-ray)

Young artist Dezzy (Dora Madison) finds her painter's block vanishing as her bloodlust grows in writer/director Joe Begos's hipster spin on vampirism. Full of a student-film energy which walks the line between engagingly daft and annoying as hell, *Bliss* starts off slowly and threatens to peter out as we follow Dezzy going about her life through a series of hackneyed tropes (the angry landlord in a vest is hilariously clichéd). Her descent into vampirism is portrayed almost as a side-effect of her hard-living lifestyle, tied to her partaking in the super-drug which gives the films its title. At times the film channels an odd combination of *The Lost Boys* and *The Addiction*, though, unfortunately, it borrows the former's style-over-substance and the latter's pretension, rather than anything enjoyable from either.

It does pick up in the second act, with some splashy violence and pleasing practical effects – a particularly fun scene involves a number of familiar TV faces getting messily dispatched – but the strobing lights and loud noise – seemingly desiring to ape Gaspar Noé but falling far short – do nothing to make up for the paucity of plot or inspiration. Full of sound and fury, *Bliss* ultimately has nothing new to say about vampires, art or addiction.

Martin Parsons



## The Wolf Hour

Dir Alistair Banks Griffin, US 2018  
On digital platforms

In the sweaty summer of 1977, with the Son of Sam killings sending terror through the New York suburbs and the temperature climbing steadily upwards, agoraphobic author June (Naomi Watts) is on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Unable to leave the Bronx apartment she is staying in, she finds herself bothered by the buzzing of her bell. The problem with Alistair Banks Griffin's good-looking, queasy chamber piece is that very little else happens beyond this. A variety of characters – friendly, shady and somewhere betwixt the two – stop in for a chat with an ever more febrile June, but the stakes never feel particularly high.

Jennifer Ehle is classy company as June's exasperated friend Margo, while Emory Cohen is particularly good as a friendly midnight cowboy.

There are the stirrings of something potent, with June's feelings of safety undermined by the threat of building fires ("Half the buildings here have burned down," her friend tells her, and her delivery boy Freddie bears the survival scars of the conflagration that killed his mother) but it's too slight to really make an impact, while the apocalyptic cityscape of the finale feels overblown after the sweaty box-tale of the first hour.

Ultimately, this is a tale of how friendship will save us all, and the film is content to let that be its only message. It is worth noting, however, that the

global lockdown might give this middling effort an extra level of attraction, now that so many of us have become unwilling Junes – locked away to keep ourselves safe from the wolf outside.

Martin Parsons



## Dreamland

Dir Bruce McDonald, Canada 2019  
Bulldog Films, £9.99 (DVD)

For many, David Lynch is synonymous with surrealist cinema, and few filmmakers are able to come even remotely close to Lynch's beautifully grotesque visions. Nonetheless, many have tried, and one cannot help but wonder if the Lynchian parallels present in the visual style and tone of *Dreamland* are deliberate or coincidental.

In Bruce McDonald's latest effort, familiar faces such as Juliette Lewis, Henry Rollins and Stephen McHattie lend their highly individual charisma to a film that has no intention of fitting in with mainstream cinema in its fever dream of a narrative. The cast undoubtedly gives the film a certain allure, and those who enjoy films that are out of the ordinary may will find *Dreamland* quite entertaining and worth a watch.

However, in spite of its experimental boldness, the film still manages to lean heavily on cinematic tropes that are as tiresome in an absurdist setting as they are in a generic mainstream movie. As a result, many viewers will find this an obnoxiously stilted attempt at conveying Lynchian wit and wackiness with a singular lack of success.

Pacing is an issue too: pointlessly meandering at times, the film crawls along at an unnecessarily slow pace that makes its 92 minutes feel mystifyingly long, even in the context of its offbeat narratives. A divisive film, *Dreamland* is not without appeal thanks to the absurdity of its humour and the playfulness of its cast: for some this dreamlike film will offer a genuine vision, whereas others will find it a nightmare to sit through.

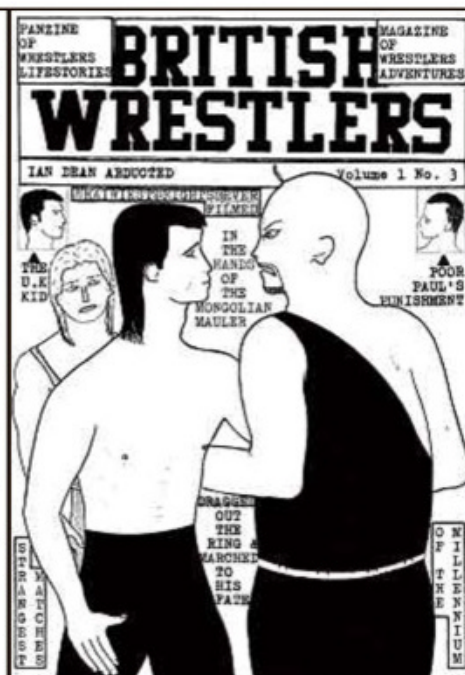
Leyla Mikkelsen





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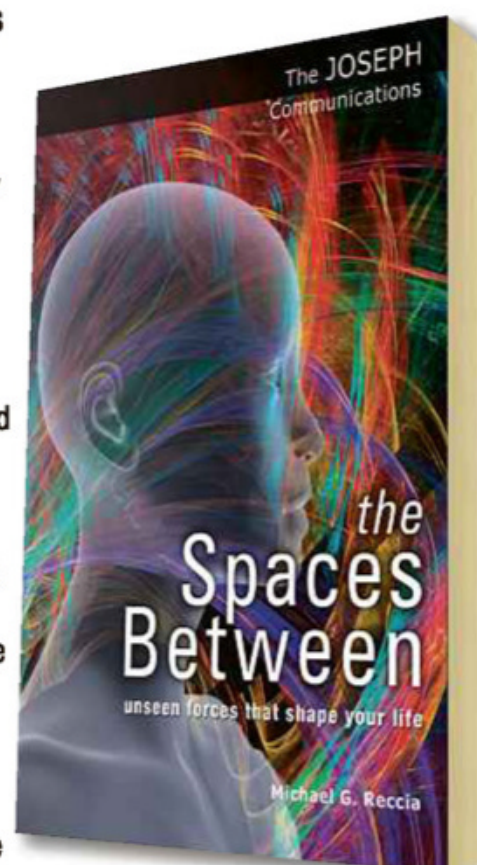
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# Graffiti Kings

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# LETTERS

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## Chick's mystery wife

I enjoyed Peter Laws's article about Jack Chick, whose publications I became familiar with in my atheist youth [FT389:32-39]. Chick's problem was the problem of every person: his ability to make choices led him to make some terrible ones.

One reason that so many people were angered or disgusted by Chick was his swallowing the tall tales of the "Ex-Jesuit" Alberto Rivera. Like a certain powerful American politician and millions of people interested in UFOs, Chick sought out people who told him exactly what he wanted to hear. The bizarre ideas he held about the Roman Catholic Church would have made any objective man laugh. For Chick, it was validation!

One thing that's been bothering me is that after his wife's death, he remarried an "Asian woman" named Suzy or Susy... no one seems to know which. And she's not mentioned in the article or in any of the online sources I've checked. I wonder if, like a beloved father who remarries, she was consigned to the memory hole as being somehow a blot on his name. I wonder who she was, what her life was like, and why she is apparently not a part of his story.

**Bryan White**  
Duncanville, Texas

## Garcia's vision

In an interview with Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, included on a recording of the band's gig at the Civic Auditorium, San Francisco, on 31 December 1984, Garcia was asked if he had seen any flying saucers. He said: "I saw a thing that was almost like a flying saucer... it was an event in the sky."

Six or seven years earlier, he had been driving at night along a back road in Marin County, California, with David Freiberg of Jefferson Airplane.

"We came round the corner by the lakes back there and there was this great white brilliant light everywhere... the whole area was really brightly lit... You know what it looked like? If you

## SIMULACRA CORNER



Tom Jones's sister Sally Jones found this stone with a starfish and face while digging her garden.

*We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 66598, London N11 9EN or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.*

imagine the sky was a flat piece of black paper, and you poked a hole in it, and there was an enormous source of bright white light behind it... and that's what it looked like. There was light pouring out of the hole – and also smoke. As we watched for a while it looked as though the smoke, or something, was pouring back into it. We watched it for 15, maybe 20 minutes."

**Interviewer:** "Was it moving?"

**Jerry:** "No, it just stayed there. As the smoke or whatever poured into it, it gradually got dimmer and dimmer as though it were filling in, as though it were filling up, until it went out and nothing was left but a sort of green, greenish shadow of it that lingered there for quite a long time like an after-image – maybe another 10 minutes, and then it was gone, that was it."

**Nick Kimber**  
Portsmouth, Hampshire

## Impenetrable

Alan Murdie refers to the alleged haunting of a house in Indiana ("Triggered in Whispers Estate", FT391:14-16), and mentions a paper on the case by Brian Laythe and James Houran (*Journal of the SPR*, Oct 2019). In my opinion, it's bloated with convoluted and impenetrable technical jargon and is quite unreadable. Murdie describes the second author, Houran, as "a distinguished academic psychiatrist" and "a psychiatrist and distinguished academic". But Dr Houran *isn't* a psychiatrist (a medical graduate specialising in mental illness). His qualifications are in psychology.

Murdie mentions a study conducted at the Indiana house on 16 July 2016 (or on the night of 17 July, according to Laythe and Houran's article). He refers to "unexplained changes in

*electromagnetic fields* registered upon an EMF meter" (p. 15; my emphasis). However, judging from the opaque *JSPR* article, *multiple* "EMF meters" were used. Radiant energy such as light consists of a combined electric and magnetic field. But it seems that when paranormal investigators talk about detecting 'electromagnetic fields' with their equipment in supposedly haunted premises, they're often referring to *magnetic fields* rather than combined electric and magnetic fields. That may have been the case regarding the investigation in Indiana. It's worth noting that electric fields are easily shielded, whereas magnetic fields aren't.

**Dr PA McCue**  
By email

## Mini alien advert

Further to Louise Bath's letter on mini-aliens [FT390:67], the advert she is referring to does not promote one particular company but is an advert by Thinkbox about the power of adverts on TV. The geek's camper van crushes the alien spacecraft, leaving the Leader to bemoan the sudden end to his invasion plans. You can watch it on YouTube.

**Martyn Vaughan**  
Newport, South Wales

## Cunning folk

Regarding Simon Young's column on witches [FT390:25], I think the description 'cunning' is the key here. It is quite likely that, in addition to an understanding of the plants around them and the ability to apply them as cures (and possibly poisons), these cunning folk understood human nature, and could take advantage of the locals' belief in their powers. Whether recovering stolen goods, lifting a curse, or cursing someone themselves, the cunning person would have made sure that everyone knew. The culprit or the victim would have believed in their power, and behaved accordingly.

**Dave Miles**  
By email



## Zodiacal ring

Martin Shough and Wim van Utrecht [FT387:48] incline to the view that the celestial ring of light seen from Brunswick (Maine) on the evening of 10 July 1907 was of an aurora-like character, akin perhaps to the recent phenomenon known as STEVE. The trouble is that STEVE is described as a purple or green arc, not a white circle. Shough and van Utrecht took no account of a rare manifestation of the zodiacal light that some astronomers were discussing in the very period at hand. On exceptionally clear nights, the more familiar cones of the zodiacal light to the west and the east can be seen to be joined by a narrow strip of milky white light along the ecliptic, which is called the zodiacal band. Under even more restricted conditions, observers in the northern hemisphere can see a continuation of this band in the northern part of the sky – or at least they did so about a century ago. The band then presents as a complete, but strongly tilted ring around the horizon.

Apparent constraints are that the observations are made from a high altitude; around midnight; in the months around midsummer; from a latitude of at least 40°; and that bright objects like the Moon and ideally even Venus or Jupiter are absent. The Brunswick phenomenon meets several of these criteria; contrary to Shough and van Utrecht's claim, it appeared at the right time of year and at the right latitude (43°54' N) for the elusive 'zodiacal ring' to have been potentially visible. A simulation programme (Stellarium) shows that the Moon and the two brightest planets were not in the sky at the time of observation. A high observer's altitude and a timing at a midnight in midsummer are ideal to ensure that the Sun is low enough below the horizon to rule out any contamination with lingering twilight. Conceivably, the condition on that evening of an extraordinarily clear night sky over Brunswick, dark and washed clean of atmospheric particles, could make up for the town's low elevation, the event's



timing a couple of hours before midnight and the fact that the ring was seen to pass through two constellations some distance above the ecliptic – Aquila and Boötes.

What's more, in that same summer of 1907, William Wallace Campbell, director of Lick Observatory (Mount Hamilton, California), called attention to the northern zodiacal light as "a faint light, which for years has been seen in the summer by various observers at Mount Hamilton, extending along our northern horizon near midnight". If this was the same phenomenon as the Brunswick ring, as seems likely, the fact that it had been noted for several years and again appeared in the summer of 1908 fortifies – or should that be 'Fortifies'? – the impression that what was seen on that remarkably clear night in Maine was the zodiacal light, albeit a special form ordinarily limited to more elevated vantage points.

For further discussion, I can recommend EA Fath, 'The Northern Limit of the Zodiacal Light', *Publications of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific*, 20. 123 (10 Dec 1908), 280-283; S Newcomb, 'An Observation of the Zodiacal

Light to the North of the Sun', *Astrophysical Journal*, 22 (1905), 209-212; and B Fessenkoff, 'La Lumière zodiacale', *Annales de l'Observatoire de Paris: Mémoires* 30 (1914), E. 1-175: 11-13.

**Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs**  
Vancouver, Canada

Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs (hereinafter MAS) makes several detailed criticisms of our article on *The Bishop's Torpedo* (FT387:44-51), specifically concerning the arc of light seen from Brunswick, Maine. We'd like to address these, in commensurate detail. First, may we say it is gratifying that knowledgeable people are paying attention and contributing ideas? It's important that after 100 years we finally put these "damned data" in rational harness.

In our article and book (*Redemption of the Damned*, vol.1, pp.353-372) we suggested that the "best fit" explanation would be something related to the aurora-like phenomenon recently christened STEVE. We don't claim this is a perfect theory; nevertheless, we think it stands the best chance of being on target. In particular, we strongly doubt that zodiacal light played a

part, and no new argument has been presented that changes our opinion, as we will now explain.

MAS remarks: "The trouble is that STEVE is described as a purple or green arc, not a white circle." This is a fair point to make. The newspaper accounts from Brunswick refer to "white" light only, yet most images of STEVE show a purplish or pinkish tint (although not green – this being, rather, the colour of the often-associated 'picket fence' aurora). However, observers report that STEVE appears grey or white in colour to the naked eye.

He is correct to describe STEVE as a rough "arc, not a... circle"; however, this objection misses the mark, in that the Brunswick phenomenon was also an arc, not a circle. Moreover, considering his references to a "celestial ring of light", "a complete... ring around the horizon", the "zodiacal ring", and "the Brunswick ring", it appears that he misconstrues the descriptions, not only of the Brunswick phenomenon, but also of the zodiacal light (as discussed in the sources he cites), which has never been observed as a complete ring or circle – upon which more below.

MAS objects that "Shough and van Utrecht took no account of a rare manifestation of the zodiacal light... called the zodiacal band." It is quite inaccurate to say we "took no account" of the zodiacal band. This was precisely the hypothesis in respect of which we reached following conclusion:

"To see the entire zodiacal band at all is an outstandingly rare event, even in the best atmospheric conditions, in the best mountain locations, at the best near-equatorial latitudes, and at the optimum time of the year. For it to appear 'very bright' from the urban streets of Maine in summer – so bright that many amazed citizens called their local newspapers – would be unprecedented and probably unrepeated."

We stand by this assessment. Contrarily, MAS proposes that the sky conditions, the near-midsummer date, and the latitude of





Brunswick, were all optimum for seeing the zodiacal light. We will address these points one by one:

In our article we had already explained the sky conditions that MAS suggests we should consider, and we reached essentially the conclusions he repeats in his letter, to wit: that storms may have washed the air clear of particulates, and that there was no Moon in the sky at the time, both improving “seeing” for fugitive light phenomena.

The only sense in which a midsummer date would be optimum, would be for observing the irrelevant – not to say imaginary – northern sector of his supposed “elusive ‘zodiacal ring’”. This “continuation of the [zodiacal] band in the northern sky” appears to be a misunderstanding on several levels. The zodiacal band is never seen as a “complete ring around the horizon” – “tilted” or otherwise – and even if it were, a glow low on the northern horizon would not be useful in explaining a luminous band crossing the sky far south of the zenith. (South of the zenith, yet not far enough south to be near the ecliptic, where the actual zodiacal band would lie.)

And as for the latitude of Brunswick being favourable to an appearance of the zodiacal band, this appears again to be a misreading by MAS of his sources.

He cites a paper by Simon Newcomb, which is about detecting the faint outer limit of the zodiacal light where it fades away N and S of the ecliptic – that is, either side of the path of the Sun – not the bright core which can (in rare conditions) make a sky-spanning “band” lying along the ecliptic, and which would be more relevant to the Brunswick observation. Newcomb argued that a faint glow on the NW horizon, rarely observable near midnight from mountain observatories, was a glimpse of the zodiacal dust far from the ecliptic plane, rendered visible because the Earth masks the direct light of the Sun. But this effect lies nowhere near the position of the Brunswick arc, and anyway none of the conditions for its visibility are met in the Brunswick case.

MAS quotes most of these

conditions accurately, but errs in stating that the effect requires “a latitude of at least 40°” and that Brunswick’s latitude meets this criterion. The figure given by Newcomb is, in fact, 46°N, not 40°N, and Brunswick at 43°54’39’’N lies over 2° south of this limiting latitude. Secondly, the time should indeed be near local midnight, with the Sun ideally a little over 18° below the horizon; however the time at Brunswick was not long after local sunset, with the Sun much too near the horizon for this northerly glow to be distinguishable from the late twilight.

Howsoever, this is all a distraction. The zodiacal band proper, lying along the ecliptic, is rarely seen complete from anywhere and, we repeat, is not best seen near midsummer at the latitude of Brunswick; indeed, midsummer is about the worst time of year – even to spot the normal pyramidal patch of zodiacal light that rises from the eastern or western horizon at dawn or dusk, never mind the rarely seen complete band.

MAS finishes by proposing that the clarity of a rain-washed sky could explain why the event occurred “a couple of hours before midnight and the fact that the ring was seen to pass through two constellations some distance above the ecliptic – Aquila and Boötes.” We are unable to offer any useful interpretation of this claim, inasmuch as Alpha Aquilæ (the star crossed by the band) and Boötes both lay south of the zenith at the time – far from the northern horizon, yet fully 30° too high to be intercepted by a zodiacal band following the ecliptic.

The solution is far from cut and dried, but points in favour of STEVE are many. STEVE typically appears south of the zenith in the northern hemisphere, occurs before local midnight, lasts up to an hour or so, and always occurs in conjunction with aurora – all of which fits the Brunswick phenomenon: south of the zenith, lasting from about 8:45 to 9:30pm, and followed by “a brilliant display of the aurora borealis”. We are offering as our “best guess” that the Brunswick arc was closely related to STEVE. However, STEVE

itself is not well understood, so there is plenty of latitude (please excuse the pun!) for further investigation.

**Martin Shough and Wim van Utrecht**

## Wrong plane?

Regarding the recollected 1953 UFO encounter by Cyril Townsend Withers [FT388:31]: I agree with correspondents Barry FitzGerald and Alistair Moffatt [FT390:68-69] that the aircraft Withers was in could not possibly be a Canberra jet. Quite aside from having no gun turret or rear position of any sort, I note that Withers says: “Although we got to 225 knots the object stuck with us”. This is nowhere near the kind of speeds the Canberra was capable of – a quick look online suggests it had a top speed at altitude of 495 knots (though the aircraft’s altitude at the time is not mentioned in the article, the top speed is illustrative at any altitude). The wording suggests the crew were going as fast as they could. This suggests to me that Withers may have simply misremembered the aircraft type. I therefore suggest that he was in fact in an Avro Shackleton. It has a rear gun turret accessible from the front of the aircraft; it is radar equipped; its maximum speed is around 259 knots; and from 1952-1953 the first Shackleton Mark 2 serial number WB833 was being tested from Farnborough airfield (Source [www.thegrowler.org.uk/avroshackleton/mark-two.htm](http://www.thegrowler.org.uk/avroshackleton/mark-two.htm))

**Bert Gray-Malkin**  
Bristol

Jenny Randles responds: That makes a lot of sense, although I doubt a Shackleton could reach an altitude of 63,000ft (19,200m). But it looks at least likely now that Withers in his old age or illness was confused; or indeed after seeing the reaction from his base between calling me and us

going to see him – even 30 years after the event still asking him not to comment – that he might have in some way complied by ‘fouling’ his story on purpose in a way he suspected was not likely to be easily uncovered.

## Transient Lunar Phenomena

Regarding Transient Lunar Phenomena [Science column by David Hambling, FT382:13]: I read about these in an astronomical magazine that seemed much more definite about their cause – impacts by meteorites. An argument presented against meteorites is the lack of impact craters, but I seriously wonder what resolution would be required to view the crater formed by a meteorite, say, one inch across; yet such a meteorite would possess sufficient energy to cause the surface of the Moon to heat up significantly, possibly enough to be visible from Earth. To give some idea of the scale, a recent article in *Astronomy Now* presented a guide to viewing the landing sites of Apollo Missions. The crater “Armstrong” is 4.6km (2.8 miles) across and is “a real test for visual observers using a moderately sized telescope (150-200mm aperture).” This brings me back to my original point: a very small meteorite of an inch or two across has a large amount of energy – because it may slam into the Moon’s surface at a velocity in excess of 10,000km/hour (6,200mph), causing the area around it to heat up and thus be visible – but how large a crater would it form?

continued on page 74



JOHN ROBERT DOHERTY



# IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts of strange experiences from *FT* readers

## Last vision

I was visiting my father in hospital where he had been severely unwell. He had been improving, but on this particular day as I entered the ward, the nurses made it clear they expected him to deteriorate rapidly. I sat with him all afternoon, as I had all week. He was quite agitated and fidgeting, so I held his hand for him to know someone was there with him. I left the ward to go home, had a quick bite to eat, but as he was so unwell I felt very strongly that I should go back to visit him in the evening. I sat with him for about two hours. He was very calm and seemingly asleep. As he was so settled, I considered going home and returning early the next morning. Dad was in the far corner of a six-bed bay. As I sat with my back to the rest of the bay, I felt the air move past me as though a door had opened behind me and I was aware of several ‘people’ standing right behind me. I nearly turned around to speak to ‘a nurse’ but honestly knew that there was no nurse there. It was very clear that ‘beings of energy’ – not staff or visitors – were behind me. I silently asked them “to make Dad’s passing swift and painless” and immediately heard “Don’t worry, we’ve got him”! They had come to ‘collect’ him.

I sat and waited a further 10 minutes, but nothing happened. As it had been an exhausting and very stressful week, I wondered if I had slightly lost my mind. I left the ward having explained to the staff that I could return within 15 minutes of a phone call. I got as far as the hospital car park when the ward staff called to say I had better come back. This was approximately 30 minutes after the presence of the beings. Back with Dad, it was evident he was passing away. I sat with one hand on his heart and the other on his forehead so he would know I was there, silently thanking him for all he



## Who or what was hiding in the room – and why?

had done for our family and me, as he had always been a truly wonderful father. In my mind’s eye I suddenly saw an image of us as a young family playing in our local woodlands and having a lovely time. This image, although instantly recognisable, was not one I would have picked, and so I believe it to be his last thoughts, as he died straight after this. Needless to say I found this experience hugely comforting, if unexpected.

I would be interested to hear if anyone else has experienced anything like this; either the presence of beings or last thoughts-images, while witnessing the death of a loved one.

**Helen Lauer**  
*Whitstable, Kent*

## Disgruntled entity?

When I was 10 years old I had a very strange experience at Plas Glynllifon, a historic mansion in Llandwrog, near Caernarfon in North Wales (pictured

above). The mansion is now a privately owned country house hotel, but when I was a child it was owned by the council, with schoolchildren staying the week for group activities, and of course, engaging in all sorts of mischief. A ghostly tale of “The Black Nun” was circulated among the school children for midnight scares. Mind you, the same “Black Nun” haunted at least two other retreats in North Wales, and I’m told she still does. We girls slept in the old servants’ quarters, which were rebuilt in the late 19th century after a fire. Our headmaster was in charge of the girls’ dorm, and his room was at the end of the corridor, directly across from a narrow staircase that led to the courtyard; it took literally seconds to travel up and down it. One afternoon, after a lively game of rounders on the green in front of the mansion, the adults decided to take us on a long nature walk around the grounds. Our headmaster soon realised he didn’t have the correct shoes for the trek; he instructed myself and a boy to get his walking shoes from his room, so off we went.

No one was inside the room when we arrived, but the main light was on and the curtains were closed. My companion

grabbed the shoes from the bedside; I opened the curtains, and on our way out I switched off the light. Seconds later we were in the courtyard. I glanced up at the window of the headmaster’s room and saw the curtains were closed and the light was switched back on! I remember the cold sensation rushing down my back and my heart thumping. We looked at each other and didn’t utter a word, but just ran like the wind. We didn’t tell anyone what had happened, possibly through sheer terror and the fear of ridicule. Could it have been something paranormal? A past servant who perhaps didn’t appreciate my interference in the room? If it wasn’t a disgruntled entity, who or what was hiding in the room and why?

**Nia —**  
*North Wales*

## Floating ball

One evening in January 1977, my wife, daughter and I were watching television in our bungalow in Otterbourne, Hampshire. My daughter (aged 23) and I were on a settee and my wife was sitting to our left in an armchair. Something caught my eye to the right of the TV set near the window. A



sphere a little smaller than a tennis ball was moving slowly towards the TV, about 8in (20cm) above the carpet. At first sight it looked like a large dandelion head, but it had no structural detail. It was misty grey, yet with a clearly defined edge. Transfixed, I watched it travel under the TV table and disappear under a Long John table near the other window. The whole event took about 10 to 12 seconds.

My daughter turned to me, her eyes popping: "Did you see that?" Not wishing to prompt her, I asked her what she had seen. She said: "It was a ball, misty, like a large dandelion head." My wife, who was knitting and only occasionally glancing at the TV, missed the whole thing, much to her annoyance as we share an interest in phenomena. The ball moved across the room in a straight line, making no noise. It didn't affect the TV, at least not audibly. I inspected the area where the ball had disappeared, but there was no evidence to show it had come into contact with anything.

**Don Tuersley**  
*Otterbourne, Hampshire*

## Spectral chat

In 2002 I lived on my own in a back-to-back house. There were four houses at the front and four at the back, with just one door for each house. My house was the last one on the back row. I was the only inhabitant and had been for some time; all the other houses had *For Sale* or *To Let* signs on them.

In the early hours one morning in November I was awakened by the sound of talking. It was 3am. When I became fully awake, the talking got louder, and I could make out about seven or eight voices, like a small party but with no music. Two of the voices stood out, one male and one female, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. The voices sounded as if they were coming to me down a tunnel or something. I got out of bed and put my ear to the party walls on either side, but no sounds were coming from the adjoining houses, but I could still hear the talking in my bedroom. I

pinched myself to see if I was dreaming, but I wasn't. I think I noticed something else, but I'm not sure: the talking seemed to be repeated every 30 seconds or so.

I decided to go downstairs, go outside round the front and see if there were any lights on in any other house. I made it to the door with my coat on and took hold of the door handle, but a feeling of weakness came over me and rooted me to the spot. It was pitch black outside and there were no lights at the end of the row of houses. I was now convinced that what was happening was paranormal, and if I went out I might meet a ghost or encounter a time slip or something. I went back upstairs where the 'party' was still going on. I climbed back into bed, wishing I had a tape recorder in working order. After about five minutes the talking faded away in a matter of seconds, as if it were going back down the tunnel. In all, it had lasted about 15 minutes. After that, all was dead quiet for the rest of the night.

**Bill Jackson**  
*Rossendale, Lancashire*

## Head first

Last year I related some remarkable coincidences [FT384:75], and now it seems the Cosmic Joker has been at play again. Around 9.40pm on 28 January, my lovely wife Margaret was briskly walking the quarter mile home after watching sci-fi programmes with our son John at his house. In the dark, she caught her foot on the uneven paving and fell headfirst. She didn't have time to put her hands out and took the full force on her forehead and ribs, and grazed her knees. It took her a few minutes to get back up and hobble home. She had an open cut and a lump the size of an egg on her forehead, and further cuts and bruises around her cheeks.

I threw a few necessities into a bag and, expecting possible long waits at the local A&E, I added the new issue of *Fortean Times* (FT389) as something for me to read when Margaret was being checked over. Between triage and see-

ing a doctor, she suggested I read my magazine, as she wasn't in the mood to chat. I took it out of the bag and randomly opened it at the Hierophant's Apprentice's article on page 56 about *Building A Fortean Library*. The title? '100 Ways to Fall Flat On Your Face'! Even though she was in considerable discomfort Margaret struggled not to laugh. (Fortunately, at the time of writing she is still delicate but on the way to recovery).

**Rob Gandy**  
*By email*

## Cathedral ghost

"Cathedral Ghosts" [FT391:72] reminded me of an experience I had in Lincoln Cathedral in about 1997. My daughter was a choirgirl there. One evening, I was sitting in the nave waiting for the end of choir practice. I was reading a leaflet, when over the top of it I gradually became aware of a pair of black shoes and the hem of a black robe approaching me. Thinking it was one of the vergers coming to speak to me, I looked up – but there was no one there. Spooky!

**Diana Lyons**  
*Leeds, West Yorkshire*

## A crystalline vision

In the very early 1950s, my family bought a house in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, on what was then an un-made road in an area that bordered the neighbouring district of Hadleigh. The road was undeveloped with a row of semi-detached houses on just one side and woodland on the other. Backing onto the rear gardens of the houses was more woodland leading onto open fields and scrubland at the Hadleigh end of the road. (The area has long since been extensively built up as housing.)

At the time of the following incident I was a very young child, perhaps five or six. One beautiful summer's evening I was put to bed when it was still light. My bedroom, at the rear of the house, overlooked our garden and the neighbouring gardens on either side. Before the childhood "night-nights" I

wanted to look out of the window, as our elderly neighbour was gardening and clipping something with shears. It was the clipping sound that intrigued me.

I awoke much later when it was dark, and my parents downstairs were entertaining friends. My father was a well-known local non-professional jazz musician and there was music and laughter. I tiptoed to the landing, trying to hear more, went to the bathroom for some water and then back to my bedroom. I had very thin curtains at the window and although dark outside, there was a suggestion of ambient light. I was getting back into bed, but I still heard that clipping / clicking sound, and it struck me that my neighbour couldn't still be gardening at night. It was only this that aroused my curiosity. I went to the window to see what he was doing.

Drawing the curtain aside, I was not confronted with the garden or woods at the back, but with what seemed like acres of the most fabulous, elaborate, crystalline structures... a vast panoply of brightly shimmering shapes, some resembling obelisks, others twisted and in spiral configurations, some so tall they reached above the roof of the house. I opened the window and looked down. The air was succulent and sweet. The structures reached to the very foundations and stretched back as far as one could see. There was movement, as if shadows were passing between these incredibly luminescent ornate structures. The starry sky was breathtaking with myriad constellations, a night sky one might see in Luxor, but not in southeast England. Throughout this observation, the clicking sound continued.

This "vision" has stayed with me all these years (I'm 72) and I've no idea what it was I saw or how a small child might have envisioned it. I do know it wasn't a dream. It was not fevered hallucination. It meant something and I'm certain that there will come a time when it will reveal itself to me.

**Jeremy Cantwell**  
*Blackheath, London*



# LETTERS

The big difference between the Earth and the Moon is of course the fact that the Earth has an atmosphere and the Moon doesn't, so a small meteorite hitting the Earth will burn up in the atmosphere, whereas one hitting the Moon will do so unimpeded. It is the velocity of meteorites that makes them so destructive. Let's consider a modest meteorite with a mass of one kilo. This could be travelling at 70,000 metres per second (roughly 150,000mph). Let's apply Newton's second law of motion – Force = mass x acceleration. Force is expressed in kilogram metre seconds. The mass of the meteorite is taken as 1 (kilogram), and supposing it hits the Moon almost unimpeded, then we can say that it reduces in speed from 70,000 m/second to 0 in 0.2 seconds. Then the force imparted by the impact is a staggering 350,000 Newtons (because its deceleration is 350,000 m/second squared).

To give some idea of how much force is involved, this could accelerate a jumbo jet from 0 to 10 m/second squared over 10 seconds and this force is concentrated over a very small area of the Moon. So it is quite possible that a considerable amount of this energy would be dissipated by heat, possibly enough to cause a transient light effect. However, it seems unlikely that the impact crater would be visible from Earth.

The "Crater of Doom" – the impact that is thought to have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs – was roughly 10 times the diameter of the asteroid that caused it. Let's suppose that on the Moon it is 100 times the diameter; this would still make it only a modest 10m across. Compare this with the Armstrong crater at 4.6km across. Of course, the Moon's surface can be observed with much greater resolution by orbiting satellites.

**(Dr) Peter WH Smith**

*Watton At Stone, Hertfordshire*

## Doctor Dee

I was interested to read about Dr John Dee's alleged connection with Sutton Hoo and treasure hunting [FT390:72-75]. Walton-

Le-Dale – site of a Roman camp where the River Darwen enters the River Ribble, and also of a building where Oliver Cromwell spent the night before the Battle Of Preston – has changed immensely over the last couple of decades. In the very hot summer of 1976, I had a job which meant I got a regular lift through what was then a small town and passing by the church of St Leonard's on the hill overlooking the Ribble. I'd try to look into the churchyard from the car, to see if there was anything to commemorate Dr Dee's attempt at necromancy that took place there, one of those factoids from a popular "Lancashire Ghosts" book. The legend is still known – in July 2013 I emailed the church asking about Dee, receiving a nice reply from Reverend Enid Briggs: "Not being a local lass, this was new to me until someone mentioned it a year or so ago. I know nothing more than can be gleaned from the Internet, and, as a church, we've no information which would throw light on the story."

A little delving gives some background. [www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk](http://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk) gives the basic story: Dr Dee, along with Edward Kelly, his assistant, and the more local Paul Wareing, entered the graveyard at midnight on 12 August 1560 with the intention of raising the body of a man who had hidden a quantity of money and died without revealing its location. They managed to raise the corpse, which answered their questions and made some predictions. There is a well-known engraving of this, with the corpse standing before the perpetrators. The website notes the inaccuracy in this tale – at the date given, Kelly would have been five years old – and adds that the oldest known grave only dates from 1628. The question of whether the money was recovered is also left open.

However, Dee did settle in Manchester, about 30 miles (48km) from Walton-Le Dale, in 1596 – though Kelly was dead by that time, and the website "Alchemical Manchester – The Dee Connection" by Manchester Area Psychogeographic implies

that Kelly, without Dee, was responsible for the act of necromancy at Walton-Le-Dale. Author Phil Rickman, who has local connections and has written about Dee, told me that this is also his understanding of the case.

But then there is a twist, if you want to see it as that: the matter of the Cuerdale Hoard. In 1840, workmen repairing the banks of the Ribble unearthed what the British Museum describes as "the largest Viking silver hoard known from Western Europe" – 8,500 objects, including coins and jewellery – adding that it was probably buried between AD 905 and 910. The hoard was taken to Cuerdale Hall to be cleaned up, but the actual site of the discovery is not far, not far at all, from St Leonard's Church and Wikipedia notes that there is a legend that "anyone who stood on the south bank of the Ribble at Walton-le-Dale and looked up stream would be within sight of the richest treasure in England" (another statement I have the dimmest of recollections of hearing). This tradition may have existed before the discovery of the hoard – see Joseph Keenyon's letter dated 1840 on the *Wikipedia* page. It is possible the treasure was buried during the reign of Richard II (1377–1399) – which does bring us a lot nearer to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and Dee's purported visit.

**Norman Darwen**

*Bolton, Lancashire*

[www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/england/lancashire/occult/st-leonards-walton-le-dale.html](http://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/england/lancashire/occult/st-leonards-walton-le-dale.html)

[www.uncarved.org/turb/articles/deemap.html](http://www.uncarved.org/turb/articles/deemap.html)

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## Haunted woods

With reference to 'Uncanny experiences in England's woods' [FT388:38-45], Leigh Woods outside Bristol are well known to be haunted. The ghost of Brunel is said to be seen on a viewpoint looking down on the Clifton Suspension Bridge, which was completed five years after his death. The ghost of a "wild-eyed young man" is alleged to have been



seen heading to the viewpoint apparently to jump off. There were once cottages in the woods and a murder took place in one. The site is said to be haunted.

Brockley Coombe is about five miles away from Leigh Woods. It was said that every Christmas Eve a phantom stagecoach would drive down the old coach road accompanied by phantom hounds and driven by headless horses. I did hear a story that someone once saw it and his hair turned white with shock. Another ghost is said to be a vicar who practised the black arts.

One summer evening about 30 years ago I drove to the top of the Coombe and set off along a track to walk to the woods. Suddenly a clump of trees to my right began shaking violently. Heroically I turned to face them. I didn't perform the banishing ritual of the Lesser Pentagram or anything and after a short time the shaking stopped. I returned that way sometime later and faced the trees but nothing happened. A witch of my acquaintance said she thought it was probably a pheasant having a brainstorm

**Paul Thomas**

*Easton in Gordano, North Somerset*

I disagree with Peter McCue's observation that the figure in the Leigh Woods incident is amorphous [FT388:43]. To me it resembles a man in a cap, leaning against a tree, with his legs crossed at the shins and with one arm visible as in my outline (clearer in the photo than my blown up version above).

**Tony Sandy**

*By email*



# PECULIAR POSTCARDS



**JAN BONDESON** shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past features the amazing story of a cat that apparently walked from London to Rugby.

## 5. THE EQUESTRIAN LION

This month's postcard features "Miss Aurora's Equestrian Lion d'Artagnan" and his friend "Chocolat" appearing at Bostock's Jungle in Paris's Jardin Zoologique. The handsome, dignified-looking Miss Aurora sits at table, with a large plate and fork in front of her; the formidable-looking lion is on the left side of the table and a woolly poodle-like dog on the right; the latter animal looks rather apprehensive, as if fearful of ending up on the plate as the lion's main course for dinner.

The concept of an 'Equestrian Lion' dates back to the 1880s, so d'Artagnan was by no means an innovator within his chosen field. When Miss Aurora was performing at Sheffield's Bostock Jungle in late 1910, a writer in the *Sheffield Evening Telegraph* was highly impressed with the antics of the equestrian lion and its frolicsome canine companion, noting that "the audience was highly amused by the dog's efforts to worry the lion." When Miss Aurora brought her animals to the Old Trafford in 1913, it was pointed out that d'Artagnan was quite a magnificent specimen, and that he had once won first prize in a lion's beauty contest in Chicago.

Two cuttings from the *North Wales Chronicle* of January 1914 describe the lion's performance at the County Theatre in Bangor. Miss Aurora, described as a charming American lady, supervised the lion as it gambolled playfully with the brown mongrel dog 'Chocolat', jumped through paper hoops, and rode a docile old horse, fitted with an over-large leather saddle "in the most approved jockey style". The journalist



**TOP AND ABOVE:** A postcard, stamped and posted at Rennes in July 1910, indicating that Miss Aurora, aka Madame Gaillard, started her career at Bostock's Jungle in Paris with her two animals. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Detail from another card showing the performing trio; the text on the back explains that the lion was normally based at the Great Bostock Jungle in Sheffield, although it regularly toured the provinces.

found it most interesting to watch Aurora feed the lion and the dog, all three seated at table; this was clearly the performance depicted on the postcard. He ended his article about Bangor's leonine attraction by pointing out that the easily amused Bangor audiences "have cordially

recognised the coolness and bravery of Aurora in tumultuous applause."

The last we hear of Miss Aurora and her lion is that they were in Sunderland in February 1914. The outbreak of the Great War was a crushing blow to many small-time travelling performers like her, with the

tastes of audiences turning to more serious matters that equestrian lions and other performing animals.

We can only hope that d'Artagnan found a sanctuary at some provincial zoo, and that Miss Aurora and the dog Chocolat visited him there regularly.



# Fortean Traveller



## 121. Tales from the Fairy Field

**FIONA MAHER** travels off the beaten track to a farm in County Galway where the natural beauty of the countryside is enlivened by fairies and banshees...

When it comes to believability, fairies tend to be lumped in with Father Christmas and relegated to that mental toy box of things we fondly remember but have long grown out of. Even their keenest advocate, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, hardly helped. After the Cottingley Fairies debacle, (see my earlier article, **FT356:30-35**), his 1922 book on the subject, *The Coming of the Fairies*, was met with widespread derision. Perhaps the fairies' ability to slip beneath adult radar while still appealing so strongly to children is part of their armour. Despite this, some of us retain a fascination with them long into adulthood, and I for one continue to be intrigued by persistent, worldwide reports of sightings.

Strange stories of terrified observers unable to stay



the night because of fairy activity are what drew me to investigate Pat Noone's farm in Ballinasloe, near Galway in the south of Ireland.

My father was a Kilkenny man and I was raised on Irish fairy stories; of fields left fallow for fear of offending the Little People and – at massive cost to the public purse – roads deliberately kinked to skirt a fairy thorn tree. Irish fairies aren't twee; they're hardcore.

The late December weather is unseasonably lovely, with blinding sunshine as I leave my brother's home in Dublin for the famous Fairy Field in Galway. We laugh nervously as he advises: "Don't come back a changeling."

The motorway turns out to be a fairly new dual carriageway with the odd toll. I drive across a flattish landscape of

largely unbroken green fields occasionally punctuated by small settlements and isolated bungalows, many in the throes of remodelling. A portico-embellished, Southfork-style homestead shows the owners aren't so much keeping up with their neighbours as beating them hands down. As the miles clock up from east to west, I wonder just what I will encounter. Leaving the motorway, I find 'The Fields of Athenry', so celebrated in song, aren't that lonely any more, as they are now almost entirely covered in small industrial units. I try to stay light-hearted, but I can't help wondering if I am at the start of a Stephen King novel.

Pat's farm is literally miles off the beaten track but still draws a steady stream of interested visitors; even a representative of Prince Charles came to see the Fairy Field – and apparently left convinced.

Pat himself is a charismatic figure. Tall and broad, with an unexpectedly youthful shock of curly brown hair atop a weathered face, he gives off the air of an elemental; he really is an Irish Tom Bombadil.

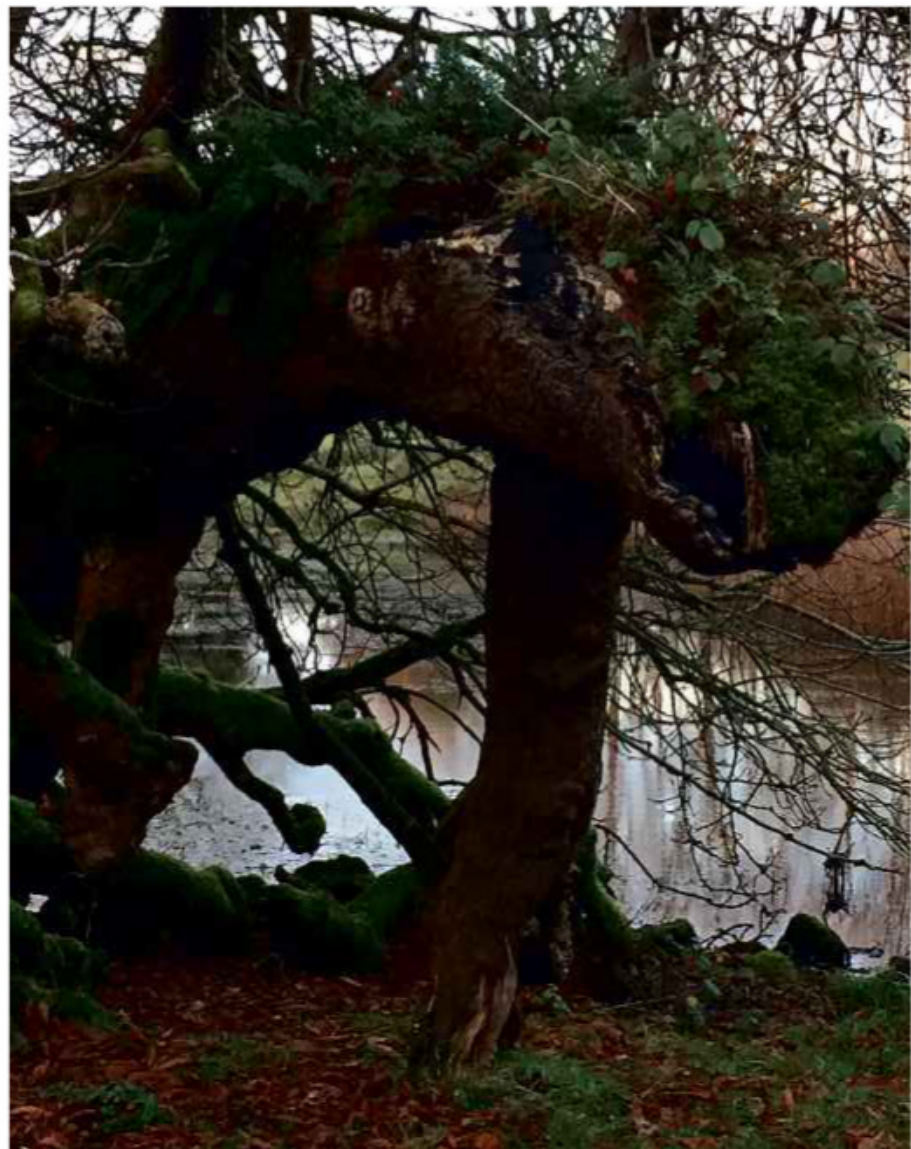
This part of Ireland harvests storm clouds blowing in from the Atlantic and, although sunny, the day of my visit follows wet weather. Leafless trees point arthritic fingers to the bright heavens as Pat and I slither along the muddy lanes leading to the Fairy Field. We pass a heap of stones, a jumble of upturned glacial erratics scraped and intricately carved by hard landscapes millennia ago. Then as we pause briefly at the Fertility Stone, worn smooth by centuries of hopeful hands, Pat points out the Banshee Stone, a speckled throne where he has occasionally seen the *bean-sidhe* sit.

Given that it's a portent of death, I ask him if he had been nervous about seeing this malign spirit. Pat smiles. He considers her – banshees are invariably female – as a positive force in the cycle of life. In the days before palliative care, anyone dying of a long and painful illness would greet the



ABOVE: The entrance to the Fairy Field. ABOVE: Red berries against a blue sky – a fairy thorn.





PHOTOS: FIONA MAHER

ABOVE LEFT: Pat Noone – the Tom Bombadil of Galway. ABOVE RIGHT: The Dragon Tree – Pat had never noticed it before.

arrival of the banshee with joy, as a kind and caring spirit that had come to put an end to their suffering.

The sky is forget-me-not blue, and my first view of the field is through a gateway perfectly framed by tall trees. A huge cairn has been raised and the land is alternatively lumpy and marshy, dotted by stunted, lichen-encrusted thorn trees that look like coral reefs. It's as if I have sunk beneath limpid water to explore a strange, submerged landscape. The air is crystal clear, and abruptly I have passed through a portal to another land.

I close my eyes and touch a branch and I can feel *movement*. Startled, I open my eyes. Pat is standing a few yards off, there is no breeze, the tree appears perfectly still – yet it feels as if some sinuous creature is writhing deep within the contorted bark. I walk away, but Pat can see I am troubled. At his suggestion, I return to the tree – and there it is again. Pat is at least 20 yards away; there is not a breath of wind, but the tree dances beneath my hand.

There is something here, an energy; perfectly neutral but fiercely alive.

We move on and a fairy thorn with a trunk like a thick sheaf of

## He considers the banshee a positive force in the cycle of life

twisted steel wire is one of the most glorious trees I have ever seen. Delicate green-grey lichen, the colour of verdigris, covers every branch, as if millions of leafy sea dragons were nestling there. Polished, deep red berries pile beauty upon beauty. Against the blue sky, the effect is breathtaking. I touch the tree and Pat murmurs a healing prayer. There is no movement this time, just perfect peace. As we walk away, I look back and a redwing has settled on its topmost branches, the bright sunshine striking vibrant copper from its plumage and what was beautiful is now sublime.

Finally, we reach the *rath*, the fairy fort, and having been told since childhood that this is the place where you must *never* go, I am hesitant. Pat is reassuring. Holding my breath, I crest the low bank and we enter. It's an elevated field with a gentle slope, bounded by banks

and hedges. In the centre is a tall 'raggedy bush'. Bristling with ribbons, scraps of cloth and occasional coins, this tree attests to ancient custom. Some of the ribbons are frayed and faded, some are new, but every one of them carries a hope or wish. Ailments are given to the tree. The idea being that when the ribbon finally rots and drops off, the illness is cured. As I tie on my own ribbon, Pat points out a curious linear depression in the ground, the remains of a collapsed tunnel he used to play in as a child. He has no idea who built it or why it is here.

We scramble down the steep bank of the *rath* and make our way past a small lake. On its far shore there is an abandoned ghost of a building. Square, unroofed, its naked gables point belligerently to the sky. Once used as a retreat by Catholic priests, someone has recently cemented a Madonna onto the exterior sill of a broken window.

I am somewhat unsettled by the contrast, but Pat has no qualms about mixing beliefs. I am not so sure the fairies agree. I turn back to look across the water to the *rath* and I'm amazed at what I see. Standing squarely between the conflicting sites, like some sort of guardian, a tree has

grown to resemble a dragon. It's unmistakable, Pat hadn't seen it, but admits it is obvious after I point it out.

I stay there that night and sleep untroubled by fairies. After an excellent breakfast cooked by Pat's wife Eveline, I set off back to Dublin.

Not far from the farm, I stop the car to get some water from the back and drive off, heedless of the fact that my precious journal has slid from the vehicle and is now lying on a lonely road, miles from anywhere.

Despite not having my contact details inside, it comes back to me the very next morning via an eagle-eyed 80-something-year-old lady, her daughter, her son-in-law, an English manufacturer who made the original Daleks and a series of extraordinary coincidences that suggest nothing less than fairy intervention – but that is a story for another time.

**If you are interested in staying on Pat Noone's farm, he can be contacted via [facebook.com/greenhillsfarmstay](https://www.facebook.com/greenhillsfarmstay)**

♦ FIONA MAHER is the author of *The Last Changeling* and co-presents The Fairy Podcast with Dan Baines. She has written for FT on the Cottingley Fairy case.



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## LETTERS

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Regular clipsters have provided the lifeblood of *Fortean Times* since it began in 1973. One of the delights for the editors is receiving packets of clips from Borneo or Brazil, Saudi Arabia or Siberia. We invite you to join in the fun and send in anything weird, from trade journals, local newspapers, extracts from obscure tomes, or library newspaper archives.

To minimise the time spent on preparing clippings for a Fort Sort, we ask that you cut them out and not fold them too small. Mark each clip (on the front, where possible) with the source, date and your name, so that we can credit you in the listing (right) when we use the material. For UK local and overseas clips, please give the town of publication. For foreign language clips, we appreciate brief translations. To avoid confusion over day and month, please write the date in this form: **1 JUNE 2020**. If you send photocopies, copy on one side of the paper only.

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# WHY FORTEAN?



**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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(who classify clippings placed in the Archives for Fortean Research)

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# PHENOMENOMIX

## GREAT PLUMMETS AND SPECTACULAR FALLS

HUNT EMERSON

OH GOD! ALREADY THIS COMIC IS MAKING ME FEEL SICK! I'M NOT GOOD WITH HEIGHTS...

OK! THE RECORDS OF ODD EVENTS ARE FULL OF AMAZING SURVIVALS FROM FALLS - OFTEN FROM GREAT HEIGHTS!

AAAGH! HOW DID I GET HERE?!

Plop!

DON'T EVER DO THAT TO ME AGAIN!

ALRIGHT... SORRY... CAN YOU JUST DO THE NEXT BIT OF SCRIPT PLEASE?

VOICE OF EMERSON

ahem SO WHAT ABOUT DARKO MINNOVIC, WHO FELL 12 FLOORS AND SURVIVED BY LANDING ON A SMART CAR!

CRUMPLE!

A SMALL SAMPLE OF SUCH TALES CAN BE FOUND IN FT233 'GREAT PLUMMETS OF 2007'.

OK, EMERSON... WE'VE REHEARSED THIS A LOT... ARE YOU SURE IT WILL WORK?

OF COURSE IT'LL WORK! THE FLUFFY SOFT STUFF IS DOWN THERE FOR YOU TO LAND ON...

ALL YOU NEED ARE TWO SLUGS OF THIS HIGH CLASS COGNAC - ONE TO DRINK NOW...

NOT A DROP SPILLED

Plop

GULP!

...AND ONE TO HOLD ON TO!

NOT A DROP SPILLED

Plop

GULP!

AAAGH!



# COMING NEXT MONTH



## MIND WARP

CERN, THE MANDELA EFFECT  
AND THE MULTIVERSE



WHO KILLED TAKABUTI?  
NORTHERN IRELAND'S MUMMY  
MURDER MYSTERY



FOLKLORE OF BREAD,  
PHANTOM PHONES,  
WEREWOLF KIDS  
AND MUCH MORE...

# FORTEAN TIMES 394

ON SALE 18 JUNE 2020

## STRANGE DEATHS

### UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

A hospital patient died after being set on fire during surgery in Romania. Surgeons at Floreasca Hospital in Bucharest used an alcohol-based disinfectant on the woman, 66, before carrying out the operation for pancreatic cancer on 22 December. But they then used an electric scalpel, which set the woman's body alight on the operating table as it came into contact with the alcohol. She suffered 40 per cent burns to her body and died in hospital a week later.

Health minister Victor Costache has promised to investigate the "traumatic" incident. In a statement, he said: "We hope to learn from this troubling episode." Deputy minister Horatiu Moldovan added: "The surgeons should have been aware that it is prohibited to use an alcohol-based disinfectant during surgical procedures performed with an electric scalpel". Romania spends the least on healthcare of any EU country, both per resident and as a percentage of GDP. It has the highest child mortality rates in Europe and an underdeveloped hospital infrastructure with a persistent shortage of medical staff. *BBC News, 30 Dec 2019.*

At least 20 people were crushed to death in Tanzania at a Pentecostal service taking place in a stadium, and 16 more were injured as worshippers rushed to be anointed with sacred oil by pastor Boniface Mwamposa, who refers to himself as "the apostle". The "blessed oil" had been poured over the floor, and the crowd pressed forward to step in it in the hope of being cured of sickness. A witness described seeing people "trampled on mercilessly, jostling each other with elbows", adding: "It was like the preacher had thrown bundles of dollars about." *BBC News, 2 Feb 2020.*

The body of a hiker was found dangling from a tree in Spain last year. Graham Bateman had been walking in the hills above the Costa del Sol but had lost his bearings after becoming disorientated, sending desperate messages to his wife from the La Concha mountains saying he was running low on water. The couple had been on holiday in Malaga. A search party found Mr Bateman's body with his rucksack hooked on the branches of a tree and with its straps wrapped around

his neck. Investigators believe he fell from a ledge and was strangled in a freak accident. An inquest held at Stockport Coroner's Court found his death to be accidental. Mr Bateman's stepson Andrew Brookes said: "He said he was in a place he knew he should not be". *D.Telegraph, 28 Feb 2020.*

A British man died in a freak accident in Thailand after he fell into the gap between two walls and spent a night trapped there. Simon Ball, 56, was found by residents on Phuket when they heard his phone ringing. He was lying on his back, with his neck bent forward and his legs over his head, wedged between the wall of a house with a water pump pressing into his body. He lived further up the hill and had apparently slipped while trying to climb along a ledge at the side of the house. *D.Mail, 26 Dec 2019.*

A millionaire businessman was crushed to death by his lawnmower, which he had been riding before running it into a ditch where it overturned and landed on top of him. Dermot Clancy, 67, owner of construction firm the Clancy Group, was found trapped beneath the red Kubota mower by a neighbour. A post mortem found he had died from traumatic asphyxiation. *D.Telegraph, 7 Feb 2020.*

A grandmother watching a game of rugby was accidentally struck on the head by the ball and died. Jennifer Selwood, 69, was rushed to hospital where she remained in a coma for two weeks before dying. Mrs Selwood had gone with her daughter Clare Rossiter to see grandson Ellis Rossiter, 10, play at Taunton Rugby Club. A player on an adjoining pitch kicked a rugby ball which hit her. Ms Rossiter said: "She told Ellis: 'I'll stay for another five minutes' and next thing she's hit by a ball and falls to the ground. The paramedics said she had a concussion". *D.Mail, 14 Feb 2020.*

A driver cheated death when he hit barriers on a roundabout bridge at Wilmslow, Cheshire. He managed to get out of his car, but fell 20ft (6m) onto the A34 where he was struck by an Audi. Anthony Mason, 21, a warehouse manager, had been drinking with friends and died from injuries sustained during the collision and the fall. *D.Star, 24 Jan 2020.*





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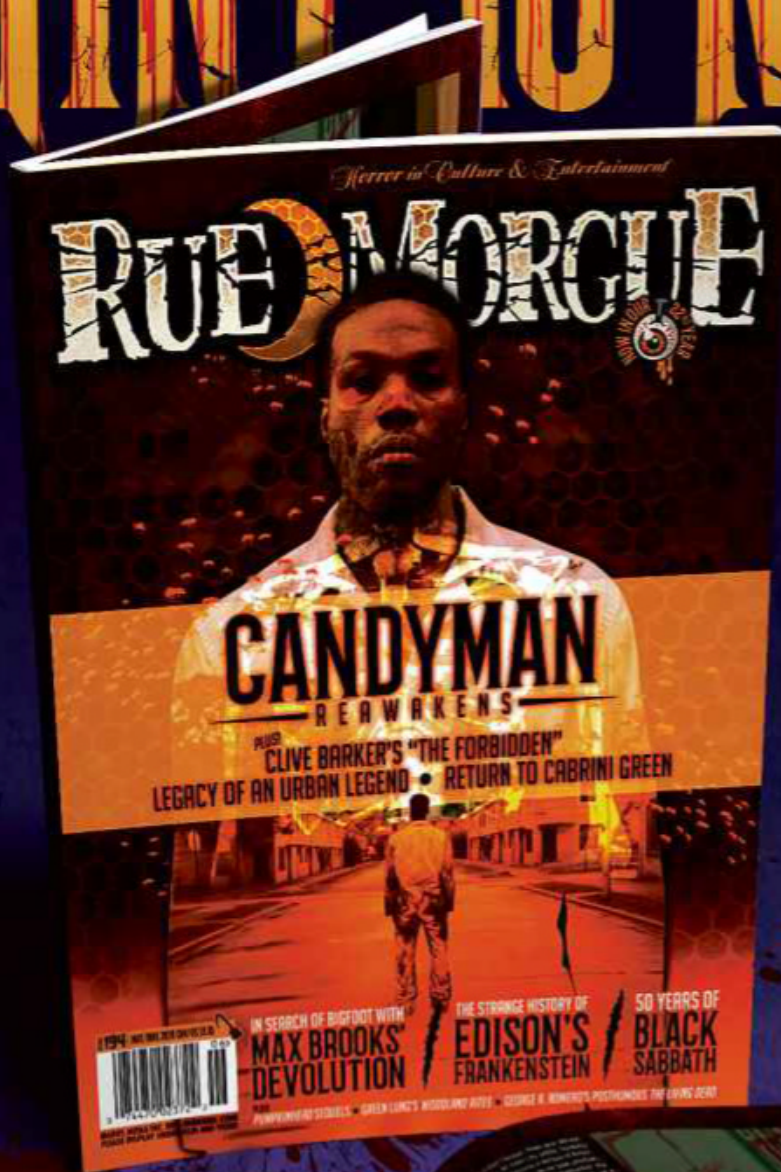
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